

INITIAL ASSESSMENT SURVEY REPORT



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

CONTENTS

	Paragraph
Introduction	
Methodology	2
Background information	4
Why initial assessment?	
Understanding the process	18
Initial assessment tools	19
Key messages	22
Summary of initial assessment among providers	
Work-based learning funded by the Learning and Skills Council	23
Provision funded by Jobcentre Plus	25
Prisons	29
Further Education colleges	31
Adult and community learning	32
Research findings	33
Content and management of initial assessment	
Tools and techniques	38
Accrediting prior learning	51
Timing	55
Inconsistency	58
Poor management of initial assessment	60
The use and effectiveness of initial assessment	
Using initial assessment to plan learning	62
Identifying and meeting learners' additional support needs	64
The use of individual learning plans	70
Communication and feedback	73
Conclusion	78
Case studies	
Asset Training and Consultancy Limited	80
Barnsley District General Hospital NHS Trust	85
Developing Initiatives for Support in the Community	89
Rolls Royce plc	93
RWP Training and Development	97
West Anglia Further Education College	103
Acknowledgements	107
References	108

INTRODUCTION

1. This survey of current practice in initial assessment takes in a wide range of publicly funded provision. The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) inspects programmes of learning funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), such as education and training in prisons, work-based learning for young people, and adult and community learning (ACL) provision. The ALI also inspects work-based learning, and learning for over-18s in colleges of further education (FE colleges). Around 80 per cent of learners in FE colleges are aged over 18. Findings from the ALI's inspections of privately funded provision are not included in this review. The **learnirect** initiative is included in this survey, as is much of the training managed by Jobcentre Plus, which is directed mainly towards helping long-term unemployed people gain and sustain employment.

METHODOLOGY

2. This report was researched and written by a team of three full-time inspectors. The team studied inspection reports produced from April 2001 up to the end of December 2002, identifying key messages about the strengths and weaknesses of providers' approaches to initial assessment. Inspection reports covered the whole range of the ALI's remit, including work-based learning, learning in prisons and further education, and ACL. The research covered the whole range of areas of learning, included providers from all parts of the country and of all types and sizes, and learners of widely varying age, experience and level of ability.

3. In early 2003, inspectors made a series of visits to training providers identified in inspection reports as having good initial assessment. They collected detailed information about their management of initial assessment, how learners experienced the process, and its impact on learning, assessment and achievement. None of the examples included in this report are referenced to a specific provider.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – WORK-BASED LEARNING

4. The term *work-based learning* used in this report does not necessarily mean learning in a workplace. It refers to specific contracts with the LSC or Jobcentre Plus. These work-based learning contracts are for teaching or training young people aged 16-25 (work-based learning for young people), or for teaching or training unemployed adults (work-based training for adults). In either case, the learners may attend learning sessions away from the workplace. For example, many young learners in engineering, construction, or hairdressing attend an FE college one day a week in term time. This forms part of their work-based learning. Some young learners, particularly some in Life Skills provision, and some unemployed adults whose primary learning goal is greater fluency in spoken English, may not attend a workplace at all.

5. There are about 1,175,000 16-17 year olds in the United Kingdom. About 610,000 of them enrol at FE colleges every year. Around 120,000 are not in education, training or employment, including an estimated 40,000 who have no qualifications.

6. The main characteristics that distinguish much Jobcentre Plus and LSC work-based provision from most further education are that, usually, learners can start at any time of the year, and they follow individual learning programmes rather than fixed courses. Many programmes are not of a set length, though many have maximum lengths. Most programmes are geared towards achieving a national vocational qualification (NVQ) or gaining a job or, in the case of Life Skills programmes, progression to further education or training. Typically, work-based learning programmes for young people involve learners working towards an NVQ and, in some cases, key skills awards. Most modern apprenticeships comprise an NVQ and key skills at an appropriate level. Local offices of the LSC manage these contracts. Contracts for work-based learning for adults, and for New Deal clients, are managed by Jobcentre Plus and are more focused on gaining sustainable employment. In many providers, training is often directed towards overcoming the barriers often associated with, or resulting from, long-term unemployment, such as low self-esteem and lack of motivation.

7. There is a wide range of work-based learning providers - some private, some charities, some managed by local authorities. The number of providers varies from year to year, as some close or merge or are bought by FE colleges and others start up. The number of providers has fallen over the past few years, and continues to fall. Most FE colleges also hold LSC contracts for work-based learning. They make up 20 per cent of LSC-funded, work-based providers. They cater for around 20 per cent of all young people in work-based learning, and provide off-the-job training, usually in the form of term-time day release, for many more. Many local authorities are work-based learning providers. Some providers are organisations that have a work-based learning contract to support the training of their own modern apprentices. Some of these providers have many more applicants than available places, and are highly selective. Other learning providers specialise in managing work-based learning for other organisations' young employees. Typically, these learning providers employ NVQ assessors, who visit the young people at work, set them short-term learning goals and assess them against NVQ standards. Many providers also try to arrange work placements or employment for young people referred to them by Connexions. Other learning providers, many of which are charities, work almost exclusively with unemployed young people.

8. The proportion of young work-based learners with a general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) in English or mathematics at grade C or above is not

known. Department for Education and Skills (DfES) surveys indicate that only 20 per cent of 16 year olds in work-based learning have five GCSEs at grade C or above. Many work-based learners in all areas of learning, including land-based provision, construction, hospitality, care and retailing, and many of the learners on the short, pre-vocational, programmes such as Life Skills, or the pathway Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes, have low levels of literacy and/or numeracy. Many New Deal clients on the least favoured options, such as the environment task force and the voluntary sector option, also have weak literacy or numeracy skills. Very few FE colleges offer these New Deal options or foundation programmes for work-based learners. The work-based learners with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy tend to be based with other providers.

9. Learners on LSC-funded Life Skills programmes are usually young people aged between 16-19 who face difficulties in entering the workforce or further training. Life Skills learners are generally the most disadvantaged or disaffected learners in their geographical area. Many have not received a full formal education and do not have qualifications. Usually, they are referred by Connexions. Many of these learners have emotional and behavioural difficulties, as well as social and learning needs. They rarely have experience of planning their future even over the immediate short-term. The emphasis of most programmes is on building confidence and interpersonal skills and in helping young people to move into to sustained training or employment. Programme lengths vary. Typically, programmes last 16-19 weeks but can be extended for much longer. Learners are usually expected to attend for at least 16 hours a week. Most courses include literacy, language, and numeracy tuition as well as careers guidance, work experience or work tasters.

10. Jobcentre Plus runs a wide range of programmes mainly targeted at long-term unemployed people, known as clients. Many clients have low levels of literacy or numeracy, but have not taken up any education opportunities since leaving school. In many cases, they do not take up a Jobcentre Plus programme by choice, but do so in fear of losing their entitlement to state benefits. In most cases, the clients, the providers, and Jobcentre Plus see employment as the key objective of their training. An increasing proportion of clients on Jobcentre Plus programmes need training in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Most of these clients recognise that their weak spoken English is their major barrier to employment. The 600 Jobcentre Plus providers include organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors, but few FE colleges offer Jobcentre Plus programmes for clients aged over 25. Many Jobcentre Plus providers also contract with the LSC. Unlike most Jobcentre Plus programmes, Workstep is aimed at employed people as well as unemployed people. It is a programme to enable disabled people to gain unsupported employment, or to remain in jobs which they may otherwise have lost because of their disability.

11. FE colleges are responsible for most education in prisons and young offender institutions (YOIs) and much of the ACL managed by local education authorities. Voluntary sector organisations also provide a lot of ACL, particularly family learning, an initiative that aims to improve the literacy and numeracy of parents and their children. **learnirect** is a brand name for a wide range of courses offered by Ufi Ltd at 2000 centres nationally, as part of the government's strategy to promote lifelong learning. Most courses are offered online, including many basic literacy or numeracy courses.

12. Over the past year or so, the ALI's inspectors have found varying standards of provision, both within and across different sectors. Work-based learning is the least satisfactory type of provision, irrespective of whether the provider is a private, public or voluntary organisation or a FE college.

The table below summarises the grades awarded by the ALI for all areas of learning in different types of provision, up to December 2002.

	% good or better	% satisfactor y	% unsatisfactor y
College further education programmes	50	40	10
Work-based learning programmes in FE colleges	22	36	42
Work-based learning programmes elsewhere	17	45	37
New Deal 18-24 provision	39	41	19
New Deal 25+ and work-based learning for adults	26	45	28

WHY INITIAL ASSESSMENT?

'An individual learning plan cannot be prepared, with any hope of its being pertinent, without the most careful interview and, probably, well-chosen testing. This is the fourth consecutive year in which this point has been made in my annual report. Initial assessment nevertheless often remains inadequate.'

Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 2001-02, ALI

13. The inadequacy of initial assessment among most training providers inspected has been cited as a concern in every Chief Inspector's Annual Report from the ALI and the Training Standards Council. Between April 2001 and December 2002, initial assessment was given as a weakness or an area for development in six times as many reports as those in which it was described as a strength.

14. The importance of getting initial assessment right, both to learners and to training providers, cannot be overstated. Well-planned and comprehensive initial assessment serves a number of key purposes:

- it ensures learners are on the right type and level of learning programme
- it identifies learners' previous experience and achievement, and uses this to improve their progress through their learning programme
- it enables the identification of an appropriate starting point for each learner, against which their progress can be measured
- it allows for the planning of an appropriate, individual learning programme
- it assesses each learner's basic and/or key skills ability
- it assesses each learner's specific additional support needs
- it can inspire and motivate learners.

15. In many ways, initial assessment is the cornerstone of any learning programme. It provides a key opportunity, early in the learning programme, for learner and assessor to work closely together in a productive and well-focused way – to look back at what has been learned or achieved in the past; to look forward to what the learner wants to achieve in the future; and to identify the steps which need to be taken, and the support required, for the learner to attain their goal. Done well, it sets the scene for a successful relationship between the learner and the provider's staff. Laying the foundation of the provider's overall approach to assessment, initial assessment allows staff to identify learning and assessment strategies which will maximise each learner's progress, and raise achievement. It provides an accurate benchmark against which to measure progress.

16. Despite this, even when providers adopt a thoughtful and appropriate approach to the process of initial assessment, many do not use the results effectively to plan and manage learning programmes. Poor initial assessment is often associated with some or all of the following:

- slow progress by learners
- inadequate target-setting for learners
- gaps in learners' knowledge and skills
- inadequate support for learners
- poor co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training
- unnecessary duplication of work by learners

17. Poor initial assessment contributes to an unsatisfactory and demotivating experience for learners, preventing them from achieving their goals.

Understanding the process

18. Many providers do not understand the scope and purpose of initial assessment. Some assume that it is sufficient to assess learners' basic skills needs, whatever their background or previous achievement. This can lead to situations where learners with a high level of previous attainment have to complete unnecessary and inappropriate assessment. It can also lead to learners being enrolled on the wrong level of a learning programme. Some providers do not fully understand the difference between the overall initial assessment process, and the tests used to facilitate this process. Initial assessment practices may include formal screening and/or diagnostic procedures, although many do not. However, initial assessment is not synonymous with testing. While tests can provide quantitative measures of performance, good initial assessment involves, in addition to any tests considered appropriate, a range of other activities to provide evidence of learners' knowledge, skills, attitudes, performance and needs. For the process to be effective, tutors/trainers must select relevant and appropriate assessment to accurately identify individuals' learning needs.

Initial assessment tools

19. There are various approaches to initial assessment and a number of different tools used to carry it out:

- **Application forms and interviews** are included in a range of initial selection techniques.
- **Screening tests** that provide an overall indication of a learner's ability level in areas such as literacy and numeracy, and may identify learners in need of particular support. However, they are not intended to show exactly what a learner can and cannot do, and should not be used for this purpose.
- **Diagnostic assessment** tools can be purchased to provide a more detailed profile of each learner's strengths and weaknesses, and the areas in which they need help. A number of organisations specialise in diagnostic testing and support for specific conditions, such as dyslexia.
- **Key skills tests** that are increasingly available as computer packages as well as written tests, to identify the learner's level of ability in the key skills of communication, application of number and information technology (IT). Some commercially available packages provide a detailed analysis of the areas in which the learner needs to improve and include workbooks and exercises to support key skills training. Key skills tests are not a replacement for the screening process described above and should not be used as such.
- **Job-role analysis tests**, or skillscans, match the learner's job role against their NVQ, to identify evidence-gathering opportunities and enable effective planning of on- and off-the-job training.
- **Psychometric tests** are used to find out whether a learner has the right practical and intellectual skills for a particular occupation. They are sometimes used to inform the selection process. Less formal **occupational aptitude tests**, to assess, for example, manual dexterity, are also used by some providers. These tests are not intended to identify or diagnose basic or key skills support needs.

- **Learning styles analyses**, though rarely used, enable learners to identify how they like to learn, whether, for example, they respond best to written information, or to watching someone demonstrate a particular technique.

20. It is not the purpose of this report to explore these tests and techniques in detail, although the examples given in the text provide some indication of the range of techniques used by providers. Useful reference sources, providing more detailed information about initial assessment strategies and tools, are given at the end of this report. It is critical that providers are clear about the purpose of initial assessment. Only then can they develop an effective initial assessment process to provide a starting point for the measurement of learners' attainment, and learning and achievement, which contributes to the motivation of learners.

21. This report examines some of the main issues found during inspections with regard to initial assessment within the different parts of the ALI's remit. It seeks to highlight and celebrate the good practice demonstrated by a small number of providers, and to identify and give examples of the key areas of deficiency found elsewhere.

Key messages

22. The following key messages were found as a result of this survey report:

- Initial assessment is four times more likely to be identified as a weakness than a strength.
- Individual learning plans are generally five times more likely to be identified as a weakness than a strength.
- At those providers carrying out effective initial assessment, a good range of initial assessment tools is available, and the relevant ones are selected to meet learners' personal and vocational needs. The process is timely, and its purpose is clearly explained to learners, who are fully involved at all stages. The results are recorded, used and shared appropriately.
- In most cases, initial assessment is not sufficiently comprehensive. Providers use a poor range of initial assessment tools, and do not match the tools to learners' individual needs.
- Some assessment tools used are inappropriate. They are devised by the provider, and do not give a reliable indication of the learner's ability or needs. In other cases, there is confusion about which tools are for which purpose. Some providers do not use the initial assessment tools in a sufficiently thorough and effective way.
- Only a small number of inspection reports cite assessment of prior learning as a strength. In many cases, learners' prior learning, experience and qualifications are neither discussed with them, nor taken into account in the planning of their learning programmes. This wastes their time and demotivates them.
- The results of initial assessment are often neither recorded nor used to develop the individual's learning programme, in terms either of the identification of their needs, or the planning of learning.
- The results of initial assessment are frequently not shared with, or explained to, learners and/or employers.

- Where subcontractors or other organisations are involved in the learning process, the results of initial assessment are frequently not shared with all relevant parties.
- There is insufficient attention to the management of initial assessment, and it is often not part of a provider's overall quality assurance cycle.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF INITIAL ASSESSMENT AMONG DIFFERENT PROVIDER TYPES

Work-based learning funded by the LSC

23. LSC-funded learning is the largest part of the ALI's inspection remit, in terms of units of inspection. Local LSCs fund over 2,000 training providers across England to provide training that leads to NVQs and other occupationally based qualifications for learners aged between 16 - 25. The qualifications available range across 14 areas of learning and generally include a significant element of on-the-job learning. Initial assessment is particularly important to determine a learner's starting point, to identify support needs, to assess the type and amount of on- and off-the-job training required, and to form the basis of target-setting as learners progress through their qualification.

24. A minority of LSC-funded providers carry out comprehensive and well-planned initial assessment, but far more do it badly. Particular concerns highlighted by inspectors include:

- a misunderstanding by providers of the purpose of some initial assessment tools, and the consequent misuse of these
- a 'one size fits all' approach, brought about by the failure to acknowledge that different types of learners require different types of initial assessment
- a failure to use initial assessment results to inform the learning programme
- insufficient use of the accreditation of prior learning and achievement.

Provision funded by Jobcentre Plus

25. Some of the provision inspected by the ALI is funded by Jobcentre Plus, previously the Employment Service. The ALI inspects New Deal provision and a range of occupationally based and foundation level learning programmes funded by Jobcentre Plus, such as longer occupational training (LOT) and basic employability training (BET).

26. Jobcentre Plus-funded provision is aimed at adults who are experiencing difficulty in finding employment. It focuses mainly on helping learners to find jobs. It is particularly important for these learners that their barriers to employability are identified accurately. Learners funded by Jobcentre Plus who have been unemployed for more than six months have a statutory right to an independent assessment of their literacy and numeracy skills, using the Basic Skills Agency's screening test. Those assessed as being below level 1 are entitled to additional literacy and numeracy support. Jobcentre Plus often subcontracts initial assessment to a local provider or organisation that is not otherwise involved in the provision of the learning programme.

27. Approximately 15 per cent of providers concentrate solely on providing training for adults, funded by Jobcentre Plus. Many more hold contracts with both Jobcentre Plus and one or more local LSCs, and provide learning programmes for both young and adult learners.

28. As well as the concerns identified for LSC-funded learning, the following problems are common in Jobcentre Plus-funded provision:

- Initial assessment is often focused only on learners' basic skills, and is not sufficient to identify barriers to employability

- Initial assessment is carried out not by the training provider, but by the Jobcentre Plus personal adviser, or a local organisation subcontracted for this purpose. Sometimes, the results of tests are not passed on to providers responsible for training, or are in poor format and may not be sufficiently relevant to the learning programme. Many providers carry out no other form of initial assessment.

Prisons

29. This is a comparatively new part of the ALI's remit. The following conclusions are based on 10 published prison inspection reports.

30. As part of its strategy to reduce re-offending, the government is focusing on tackling the lack of skills and education which prevent many ex-offenders from finding employment. The Prison Service requires all prisoners to complete an initial assessment to determine their learning needs. In most cases, initial assessment is the responsibility of the education contractors, usually a college of further education, which carry out initial assessment as part of the induction process. The focus is usually on basic skills, using the Basic Skills Agency's tests to measure literacy and numeracy skills levels of prisoners.

- Although a small number of prisons use initial assessment appropriately to identify learners' prior learning and achievement, employability skills, and learning and support needs, most prisons rely only on the use of basic skills tests. There is not enough use of a range of initial assessment tools.
- Information collected during initial assessment is not routinely sent with the prisoners when they are transferred to other prisons. Many prisoners have to retake initial assessments each time they transfer to a new prison. In some cases, the results of initial assessment are not shared effectively with the learners themselves, or with instructors.

Further Education colleges

31. The ALI and Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) jointly inspect further education college provision. Approximately 40 college inspection reports were studied for this survey report. College inspections are led by the ALI when the majority of learners are aged over 19. Many reports contain contributory grades for work-based learning under the main area of learning.

- Many colleges have comprehensive initial assessment arrangements. Generally, full-time learners complete a range of written assessments at the start of their course or during the induction period as well as an initial assessment of their basic and key skills.
- The initial assessment arrangements are not always effective. In some cases, initial assessment takes place once learners have started their courses, rather than before the start of a learning programme. Some learners are placed on inappropriate courses.
- On some courses, assessment assignments are well planned and vocationally relevant with assessment information made available to personal tutors. However, insufficient use is often made of this information in the planning of courses and the setting of individual learning targets.
- Work-based learners in colleges usually spend most of their time in the workplace, and join existing groups of learners for their off-the-job training. Many

colleges do not ensure that initial assessment takes account of this, and do not plan effectively learners' on- and off-the-job training.

- In many cases, initial assessment is appropriate to assess individual learners' additional literacy and numeracy support needs. However, there is not enough emphasis on matching learners' job roles to the level and content of their qualification.

Adult and Community Learning

32. Following a pilot inspection phase, 25 ACL inspections have taken place since October 2002, including local authorities, adult education colleges and smaller providers. The ACL sector is diverse and learners attend for many reasons. For some it is the first step into learning after school, and others enrol to pursue an interest or develop a new interest. This type of provision has often been referred to as leisure learning. Most provision is non-accredited and providers are at different stages of developing systems to identify and plan learning and learning outcomes. A lot of provision is dispersed across large areas with a variety of modes of delivery, a largely part-time staff group and funding from a range of sources. In local authorities, most of the provision is subcontracted to local providers.

- There is not enough well-developed initial assessment except in areas such as basic skills, where learners are increasingly accustomed to working with individual learning plans.
- In many providers there is some informal initial assessment. However, there is insufficient formal recording of learners' existing skills and competence. Learners may be asked to identify their personal learning goals but there is often insufficient support to ensure these are realistic and specific. There is not enough formal initial assessment in health and fitness programmes where the assessment of learners' health, medical status or exercise experience is crucial to the appropriate work placement of learners.
- For many learners in ACL, the first assessment usually takes place on arrival at their first class. Learners are sometimes placed in an inappropriate class.
- Initial assessment is more developed within literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision and for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. However, in this provision, screening tests are often confused with diagnostic assessment and initial assessment is generally not used to develop and produce individual learning plans. Specific learning targets are poorly developed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

33. As part of the research for this survey report, a statistical analysis was carried out on the 1,324 area of learning report sections contained within 589 inspection reports published between April 2001 and December 2002. The results present a worrying picture.

34. Of the 440 reports sections in which a bullet point is given regarding initial assessment, four times as many weaknesses are identified as strengths. There is considerable variation in the standard of initial assessment carried out across different areas of learning. Taking work-based learning as an example, in construction, engineering, and information and communications technology (ICT), initial assessment is identified as a weakness twice as often as a strength. In land-based provision and visual and performing arts, the proportion of strengths and weaknesses is approximately equal. On foundation programmes, an area in which the careful identification of barriers to learning and employability is of particular importance, initial assessment is cited as a weakness in over three times as many report sections as those in which it is identified as a strength. In business administration, management and professional, and health, social care and public services, the situation is very similar. In hospitality, sport, and leisure and travel, weaknesses are over six times more likely to be identified than strengths. In hairdressing and beauty therapy, and retailing, customer service and transportation, the situation is even worse, with over 10 times as many weaknesses cited as strengths.

35. The use of assessment of prior learning (APL) is poor. The numbers are too low to make valid comparisons across the areas of learning, but, in those reports that make a judgement about APL, almost 50 per cent cite it as a weakness.

36. More than half of the providers cited as carrying out good initial assessment also showed signs of good or improving achievement and retention rates. Initial assessment on its own does not necessarily ensure effective learning. However, providers who are good at initial assessment have a significantly better overall grade profile than those in which it is given as a weakness. Forty-three per cent of reports in which initial assessment is given as a strength received a grade 1 or 2 for that area of learning. Conversely, 55 per cent of the reports in which initial assessment features as a weakness are graded 4 or 5.

37. Statistics alone provide a narrow picture. A more detailed analysis of the relevant report text identified a number of themes which characterise providers' approaches to initial assessment and which have a significant bearing on the adequacy or otherwise of the outcome. These divide into two main categories:

- The content and management of initial assessment, such as the tools and techniques used, methods of accrediting prior learning, the timing of initial assessment, and the consistency with which initial assessment is applied to different groups of learners within the same organisation.
- The use and effectiveness of initial assessment, such as how effectively it is used to develop learning plans, how well it identifies learners' additional support needs, how well it supports the formative assessment process, how clearly and systematically the outcomes of initial assessment are communicated to relevant parties.

THE CONTENT AND MANAGEMENT OF INITIAL ASSESSMENT

Tools and techniques

38. In nearly all of the providers where initial assessment was judged to be a strength, it is the breadth of the process, and the way it is managed which are cited as particularly noteworthy. In these providers, initial assessment is comprehensive, and appropriate to the needs of individual learners. It comprises tests to identify learners' basic skills needs, their level of ability with regard to key skills and their occupational aptitude. It also examines their job role, to ensure that it meets the requirements of their chosen qualification in terms of the level and nature of the work carried out.

Good Practice

All clients are given a thorough initial assessment of their basic and practical skills when they start on the option. Clients complete a self-assessment of their practical skills and previous experience, a nationally recognised basic skills test and an occupational skills test. This information is used to produce a realistic individual learning plan for each client and to identify if a client needs additional learning support.

39. Good initial assessment involves taking into consideration varying levels of ability among learners, and using different tools where appropriate. For example, while learners with GCSE attainment at grade D or below are likely to require a basic skills screening test, those with higher grade GCSEs may benefit more from tests to identify their key skills level. In a small number of cases, providers establish their learners' preferred learning styles. This gives them information about the best training methods to use with particular learners. For example, some learners work well in group sessions, and others prefer to work individually. Some learners respond well to visual training techniques, such as watching someone carry out a task, while others learn better from textbooks. Used effectively, learning styles assessment enables providers to give training, support and formative assessment which best meets the needs of the individual learner.

Good Practice

There is a thorough initial assessment and induction process. All learners complete a basic skills test which covers reading, spelling, punctuation, and numeracy. This, combined with an assessment of learners' work choices, learning styles and self-esteem, provides a comprehensive analysis of a learner's ability, and where learning and personal support are required. This information is used in a thorough induction programme which covers all aspects of the training programme. Staff use information collected during initial assessment to produce individual learning plans. These are informative, kept up to date and reviewed regularly.

40. Most providers with good initial assessment understand the difference between basic or key skills screening, and diagnostic assessment. While they may use an initial test, such as the Basic Skills Agency test, to determine skill levels, they understand that this is insufficient in itself to provide a detailed picture of learners' strengths and weaknesses. They build on the results of the screening tests by using more specialised tools to determine learners' individual difficulties, or their strengths and weaknesses with regard to key skills. The case study on *RWP Training and Development* provides a good example of how learners' key skills development can be helped in this way. Some providers also carry out in-house diagnosis of dyslexia, dyspraxia, or other additional support needs, or, if they do not have the resources to provide the testing themselves, refer learners to specialist agencies who provide this service.

Good Practice

Most clients benefit from comprehensive initial assessment. When the initial interview identifies that a client has an additional learning need in literacy or numeracy, or has dyslexia, initial assessment is used to identify a benchmark from which an individual learning programme is developed. Most clients undergo a basic skills and learning styles assessment and the results are used as a basis for the individual learning plan and help tutors to amend the lesson plans. This aspect of planning individual learning was identified in the self-assessment report. An interactive key skills assessment package is used by curriculum leaders to establish clients' current ability and long-term potential.

41. By far the most common weakness identified among those providers with inadequate initial assessment is that the process is insufficiently comprehensive. Key aspects of initial assessment are either missing altogether, or are so poorly managed as to be either ineffective, or potentially damaging to the learner. A small number of providers have no initial assessment arrangements at all.

Poor Practice

There are no arrangements to carry out an initial assessment of learners. There are no diagnostic assessments made at the start of learning to establish basic or key skills support needs or to account for prior learning and achievement. The provider is unable to give exemptions from some parts of the learners' qualification. A number of learners have basic skills learning support needs. Some other learners have a range of qualifications suitable for accreditation and exemption. Many learners are on training programmes at too high a level and many learners who require learning support do not receive it.

42. Providers often initially assess learners' basic skills ability or key skills level, or their attitude, experience and occupational aptitude, without putting together a programme of initial assessments. This would provide a clear picture of each learner's needs and abilities.

Poor Practice

Initial assessment of learners is poor. Many learners are not assessed for basic skills. When it is used, the assessment is inadequate and does not identify any additional learning or support requirements. Some learners have joined the training programme with no formal interview or initial assessment. Some learners have been put on inappropriate training programmes. One learner has been put on a technical service NVQ when the workplace activities are manufacturing. Another learner was put on the wrong modern apprenticeship training programme.

43. In the small number of prison inspections so far carried out, there are several examples of learners' needs not being routinely assessed, or of the tests used being inappropriate for their level of ability.

Poor Practice

There is no routine analysis of learners' needs. The induction arrangements are poor. Only well-motivated prisoners volunteer for education and the initial assessment of basic skills. For example, only 15.5 per cent of learners entering the prison in July 2002 were assessed for basic skills needs. Of these, over 50 per cent were assessed to be below foundation level for literacy and numeracy. No analysis has been carried out, of the number and needs of learners already at level 2 and above, of the basic skills framework. Without this information, it is not possible to meet the needs of all learners when planning the foundation training programme.

44. It is not only in the prison sector that inadequate initial assessment leads to learners being put on the wrong learning programme. In some cases, initial assessment is not used to identify the appropriate level and type of learning programme for each learner. Neither is it used to ensure that their qualification is within their capabilities, while also being sufficiently challenging, and that their work role will provide them with adequate opportunities to demonstrate their competence. Being on an inappropriate learning programme has serious implications both for a learner's motivation and their rate of progress. A small number of providers, while

matching the learner to the right type and level of qualification, do not ensure that they are working towards key skills units at the right level for their ability.

Poor Practice

Some initial assessment is not effective. Central support staff carry out initial assessment for literacy and numeracy during induction, but this does not always identify the most relevant qualification for the learners' needs and abilities. For example, a dyslexic learner was assessed and placed on a level 1 NVQ programme when capable of completing an NVQ at level 2.

45. Some providers do not fully understand the purpose of particular tests. For example, tests designed to identify a learner's key skills level can also be used to measure their basic skills ability.

Poor Practice

The initial assessment process is weak. The key skills initial assessment is used as a tool for judging literacy and numeracy ability. It was not designed for this purpose. The learners' knowledge of administration is assessed, but there is no planned training to fill the gaps in knowledge. There is no separate test to establish basic skills ability and no remedial training is available. The initial assessment process does not ensure that learners are allocated to the most appropriate training programme.

46. Some providers, while acknowledging the importance of initial assessment, do not carry it out in a sufficiently formal way, with the results often not recorded. This is an issue identified on several ACL inspections.

Poor Practice

In the one music class, formal assessment is at the request of the learner. Initial assessment of learners' abilities when they start on a course is generally carried out well at an informal level. However, there is no procedure for ensuring that this information is collected and used to develop an individual learning plan.

47. This lack of formality can have potentially damaging consequences.

Poor Practice

There is no formal initial assessment of learners at the start of an exercise programme. Information about learners' medication and medical conditions is not systematically collected and recorded. Although tutors may carry out a health check at the beginning of the programme, it is not thorough. Checks at the beginning of sessions for recent illness or injury which may affect the learners' ability to take part, are not always made. In one lesson, two learners had evident mobility difficulties and found the task too difficult. The tutor did not respond appropriately.

48. In other cases, providers use tests which they have devised themselves. The marking schemes for these tests are generally subjective and the results unreliable.

Poor Practice

Initial assessment is not adequate to plan the learner's training programme. The provider assesses a candidate's literacy by their ability to complete an application form and to cope with the instructions on the two diagnostic tests. It has developed the two tests over a number of years as occupational diagnostic tools and uses experience to interpret the results. There are no tests to assess basic skills or key skills. The organisation has written a standard operating procedure covering the initial interview, but in practice it is not followed. The interview is not structured and is not effective in gathering detailed information of the candidate's career aims, prior experience, or level of actual or expected examination results.

49. In some cases, providers use initial assessment to collect information which might be helpful to them in organising matters such as work experience. Although an

important aspect of the planning process, this is not sufficient to ensure an effective learning experience.

Poor Practice

Initial assessment is poor. The skill scan during induction is inadequate. It is based on the learners' self-assessment of their experience. It is ineffective in identifying the appropriate level for the learners' programme. Some of the questions are about the learners' willingness to travel, and work split-shifts.

50. In other examples of poor practice, providers do not manage the testing process in a sufficiently thorough way. For example, they allow learners to complete initial assessment tests at home, unsupervised, or do not mark tests which have been completed.

Poor Practice

There are poor methods used to identify the skills levels and prior achievements of learners. A basic skills test is included in the adult programme, but it is not accurately marked. One learner had achieved a nationally recognised ICT qualification, but was asked to do the same programme again. Three modern apprentices had exemptions from key skills, but it was not identified on the individual learning plan or discussed with the learner. One learner who is working towards using IT at level 2 has achieved a previous qualification which gave an exemption, but this was not identified by the organisation.

Poor Practice

There is inadequate initial assessment. A basic skills test has been devised by the provider which identifies learners who may have additional learning needs. However, this test is a poor example for the learners as it has spelling and grammar mistakes in several areas. It is not an accurate diagnosis of needs, and the results are not used to develop an individual learning plan.

Accrediting prior learning

51. Most of the providers that carry out good initial assessment acknowledge the importance of accrediting learners' prior experience and achievements. The process of assessing and accrediting prior learning involves carrying out a detailed examination of each learner's qualifications, knowledge, life and work experience, establishing how up to date and relevant this is, and matching it to their qualification. Where a learner can clearly demonstrate competence through APL, they can either be accredited for that unit, or part-unit, or fast-tracked through that aspect of the qualification. Similarly, evidence of good GCSE achievement can mean that learners are exempt from key skills tests, and reduce the amount of key skills evidence they need to collect. APL speeds learners' progress and often helps to ensure that they remain motivated. In some cases, particularly for adult learners who may have been out of the education system for some time, or for learners who have poor previous experience of education, APL is a very effective tool for improving their confidence, as it enables them to focus effectively on their prior achievements.

52. Approximately one quarter of the providers given a strength for initial assessment were found to have particularly effective systems for accrediting prior learning, usually based around a detailed interview with the learners, and often including other strategies, such as contact with the learner's school or previous employer. Staff at these providers have been trained to carry out initial assessment, they understand it, and explain its purpose well to learners.

53. However, far more providers accredit prior learning poorly than do it well. In doing so, they risk wasting learners' time by requiring them to repeat work which they have already completed. Inadequate APL demotivates learners, slows their progress, and does not allow them to reflect on and celebrate prior knowledge and achievement. There are many references in inspection reports to incomplete or

unsystematic APL. The key issues identified include procedures not being followed by staff and, overwhelmingly, learners' prior experience and achievements being discussed with them, but neither recorded, nor used in the planning of their learning programme.

Poor Practice

Learners are not given a comprehensive initial assessment of their skills at the start of their modern apprenticeships. All new learners are now given a basic skills test. This is inappropriate for some learners who have high GCSE grades and, in some cases, higher level qualifications. All learners' key skills are also assessed, but credit is not given to those who have already gained key skills qualifications. Some learners are repeating key skills work. Learners' job roles are not analysed to check whether the job provides opportunities to gather evidence of all the competences required to achieve an NVQ. Employers are not involved in the initial assessment processes. No agreement is made with employers which stipulates their contribution to the training and support of learners. Learners do not have detailed learning plans with agreed targets. Neither learners nor their employers have a clear understanding of the modern apprenticeship frameworks or how long they should take to complete.

54. In a small number of cases, providers make incorrect decisions regarding learners' prior experience, wrongly exempting them from aspects of their qualification.

Poor Practice

All assessors accredit prior learning. Accreditation is mainly used to assess learners' qualifications in key skills. However, some qualifications are being used that are not acceptable as evidence. In one case, the communication key skill was accredited with a GCSE which the learner had not achieved. Copies of certificates are not kept in the learners' files and accreditation of prior learning is sometimes based on conversation rather than written evidence.

Timing

55. Providers with good initial assessment introduce the process in time for it to have an impact on the planning of each learners' programme. They acknowledge that there should be continuity between the initial guidance provided for the learner, which should give them sufficient, objective advice to enable them to make an informed choice of learning programme, the application process, and the activities which takes place at the start of the learning programme. They also understand that these provide a rich source of information about each learner.

56. Some providers co-ordinate particularly effectively their initial assessment process with their recruitment and selection procedure. This ensures that information collected about the learner from their very first contact with the organisation can be used to provide an accurate picture of their needs and aspirations. However, the strategy only works if providers understand that selection is a two-way process that should benefit the learner as well as the organisation. It is vital that the information collected should be taken forward and used as part of the initial assessment process. Learners who are unsuccessful in gaining a place should be referred to Connexions, Jobcentre Plus or other training providers who can better meet their needs, and all learners, whether successful in their application or not, should be given constructive feedback on their performance. The use of trial periods can also be valuable in enabling the learner to decide whether a learning programme is right for them.

Good Practice

The four-week trial is used for learners to decide if hairdressing is the right course for them. During this time, the trainer assesses the learners' practical abilities, interpersonal skills, teamworking approach and aptitude for hairdressing.

57. By contrast, some providers initially assess their learners' needs and abilities too late for the process to be effective. The information collected cannot be used to plan learning programmes and there is often a delay in providing any necessary additional support.

Poor Practice

Some subcontractors carry out satisfactory initial assessments. However, others do not accurately record or interpret the results. As a result, some clients receive inappropriate support. Some subcontractors do not carry out initial assessments until clients have already started their training. These subcontractors cannot use the initial assessment to guide clients' choice of qualifications. The lateness of these initial assessments also delays help with basic skills for clients.

Poor Practice

Additional learning needs are not identified early enough in the programme. All learners complete three diagnostic tests to assess their additional learning needs. The first test is done at induction but subsequent tests are delayed by as much as six months. Many learners have completed units towards their NVQ before any additional learning needs are identified and appropriate support is given. This process does not help learners when they are choosing which training programme to follow.

Inconsistency

58. It is important that providers achieve consistency of approach with regard to initial assessment. This does not mean that that same tools should be used with learners regardless of their needs, but that initial assessment should be equally effective for all learners. All the case studies in this report are characterised by this consistency. However, inspection reports highlight several examples in which providers treat one group of learners differently from another. In some cases, learners who are employed before joining their training provider receive either insufficient assessment of their needs, ability and experience, or, more commonly, none at all. Similarly, learners who have been referred to the provider by Jobcentre Plus, or by another training organisation, receive no initial assessment.

Poor Practice

Initial assessment is ineffective. Learners who are employed do not complete a basic skills test, regardless of previous experience or qualifications. Most learners have left school without any qualifications and require additional learning support for spelling and writing. This additional support is identified by the assessor during the training programme and additional support is then provided.

59. Some providers who operate over more than one site carry out adequate initial assessment in some of their learning centres, but not in others. Equally, a small proportion of providers carry out good or adequate initial assessment in some areas of learning, but poor initial assessment in others.

Poor Practice

Arrangements for initial assessment are unsatisfactory. In many cases, there is only a brief initial interview which is inadequate to identify the learner's needs. When initial assessment is completed and documented, the information is not used to create a comprehensive individual learning plan. Tests of learners' skills are used in one geographical area of the training provider's operations, but not in others. There is no overall strategy for the initial assessment of basic skills. Two different testing systems are used. Insufficient consideration is given to learners' prior achievement and experience. Previous qualifications are not always taken into account when individual learning plans are being written. Training co-ordinators frequently fail to recognise the relevance of learners' prior qualifications and if learners have already collected relevant evidence in other portfolios, it is not always taken into account. The initial assessment of key skills is inadequate and the needs of learners are not always identified.

Poor management of initial assessment

60. The main reason for inconsistency in initial assessment is that managers take too little responsibility for overseeing and quality assuring initial assessment. Although they understand the need to observe training and to audit documents such as progress reviews, they neither observe nor audit initial assessment to ensure it is carried out appropriately. Neither do they continually review their initial assessment process to ensure that it remains fit for purpose. Another major source of difficulty is the use of subcontractors. Some providers rely on subcontractors to provide initial assessment, but do not take sufficient responsibility for managing and monitoring the process. They do not make specific reference to initial assessment in their formal contract with the subcontractor, and provide insufficient guidance on how it should be conducted and how results should be shared. This is a particular problem in New Deal provision, where different subcontractors providing the same option have different standards of initial assessment.

Poor Practice

Jobcentre Plus directly manages the employment option and subcontracts training in Gateway, the self-employment route, and all other options to training providers. These training providers then subcontract training to other organisations. There is poor management of the training providers and their subcontractors. The unit of delivery does not clearly specify what is expected from training providers or their subcontractors. There are no guidelines for areas such as initial assessment, jobsearch and progress reviews.

THE USE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF INITIAL ASSESSMENT

61. The value of initial assessment is lost even if appropriate assessment tools are used, if the results are not carefully analysed and put to good use.

Using initial assessment to plan learning

62. For initial assessment to be fully effective, it should be introduced in a timely manner, and the results used in the planning of the individual's learning programme. Only a small number of providers do this well. They collect a range of information about each learner and use it as the basis for decisions about the order in which different parts of the qualification will be tackled, and the content and scheduling of both on- and off-the-job training. In these providers, learning programmes are truly individual and tailored to meet learners' specific needs. The providers featured in the case studies in this report make good use of the information collected during initial assessment.

Good Practice

There is a thorough initial assessment and induction process. All learners complete a basic skills test which covers reading, spelling, punctuation, and numeracy. This, combined with an assessment of learners' work choices, learning styles and self-esteem, provides a comprehensive analysis of a learner's ability, and where learning and personal support are required. This information is used in a thorough induction programme which covers all aspects of the training programme. Staff use information collected during initial assessment to produce individual learning plans. These are informative, kept up to date and reviewed regularly.

63. In many cases, however, the results of initial assessment are not reflected in the planning of learning. In some providers, learners within an area of learning all work towards the same units of their qualification, irrespective of their experience, ability and job role. Their learning is not planned to meet their individual needs. On- and off-the-job training is often poorly structured. Tasks carried out by the learner are dictated only by the day-to-day requirements of their work role. Insufficient consideration is given to the need for them to collect NVQ evidence. There is insufficient or no co-ordination between the learners' experience in the workplace, and their off-the-job training.

Poor Practice

Learning is poorly planned for clients across all foundation programmes. Some clients have an initial assessment of their basic skills by the provider or another local provider. All have their barriers to employability identified through informal discussion with a trainer. However, the information gathered through initial assessment is not summarised, or used to plan a coherent learning programme for each client. Individual learning plans are drawn up for some clients, but these lack sufficient detail. They contain short-, medium- and long-term targets, which are poorly focused and fail to tackle clients' barriers to employability. Individual learning plans do not state what clients need to do to achieve their learning goals, and are not updated to reflect progress.

Identifying and meeting learners' additional support needs

64. A key purpose of initial assessment is to identify learners' additional support needs. These needs range widely, and may include the requirement for help in improving literacy and numeracy, support for specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, or personal and practical difficulties, such as homelessness, debt or low self-esteem. Providers where initial assessment is a strength understand the range of issues which might affect learners' progress. They establish what support their learners require and give this support in a structured and coherent way. Some have staff qualified to provide additional learning support. Others develop and maintain effective links with local organisations specialising in issues such as basic

skills, dyslexia, homelessness and substance misuse, to whom they refer learners needing particular types of help.

Good Practice

There is particularly good learning support for those learners identified as having additional learning needs. Following an initial assessment, those prisoners applying to take part in an educational programme who have been identified as having additional learning needs are able to join an entry or pre-entry literacy and/or numeracy programme.

65. Approximately half the providers judged to carry out weak initial assessment are inadequate in identifying and meeting learners' support needs. A few of these providers do establish that their learners need help, but do so only after the learners have been on their learning programme for several months. This is too late. The lack of appropriate support results, in some cases, in learners making slow progress through their qualification, or even leaving early without completing their learning programme.

Poor Practice

All learners receive an assessment of their basic skills. This assessment is not used systematically as a means of identifying those learners who need additional learning support. An assessor decides whether or not learners should be given additional support and, in some instances, this is not provided for them even though they have performed poorly in the basic skills test. For example, some learners were informed that they did not need help with literacy and numeracy when their performance in the test clearly showed that they did. Arrangements for providing learners with additional learning support are inadequate.

Poor Practice

As part of the recruitment process, learners complete an initial assessment of their basic and key skills. The results of these assessments are not used to plan an individual learning programme to deal with learners' needs. The results of initial assessment identified that many learners require support in one or more areas. For example, some learners require support in developing their skills in spelling, punctuation or application of number, which are important in business administration occupations, but this support is not provided.

66. In further education colleges, the arrangements for providing additional support are often better for full-time learners than for work-based learners who attend the college on a day-release basis.

Good Practice

There is a well-structured induction programme for all students that helps them settle into their courses and to understand their rights and responsibilities. Vocationally specific initial assessment tests in literacy and numeracy enable full-time students to be placed on the appropriate level of course and for any additional support arrangements to be made in a timely manner. Arrangements for assessing and responding to the needs of part-time students are less structured.

67. A particular weakness among providers funded by Jobcentre Plus is the failure to accurately identify learners' barriers to employability. This is a key omission, since gaining employment is the main purpose of Jobcentre Plus programmes.

Poor Practice

The induction process includes an interview and a self-assessment by the client, which is aimed at identifying learning difficulties and any other needs or problems. Some staff are skilled in identifying and dealing with these needs, but in some cases not all relevant factors are identified at this initial stage. Consequently, the full extent of barriers to learning or to gaining employment do not become apparent until later on. The current system is not comprehensive enough to ensure that significant points are not missed and to ensure that the full training period is used to the clients' best advantage.

68. In prisons, psychological issues which may affect learning are not always identified.

Poor Practice

There is no formal psychological assessment of learners with behavioural disorders, and no clear policy or practice to differentiate between mental health problems and behavioural difficulties. Individual learning plans lack specific and detailed targets for learners' social development.

69. Some providers establish learners' individual needs, but fail to provide the help required. In most cases, this is due to too few staff with the required qualifications and experience to support learners effectively, and weak management of the key processes of initial assessment and learner support.

Poor Practice

There is weak management of some key training processes in some training providers. The initial assessment process is weak and the results are not used as the basis of individual learning plans. Individual clients' needs are not always identified or met. Few learning support needs are shown on individual learning plans, despite the many disadvantages found among the client group. Individual training plans are often poorly prepared and they lack sufficient detail. They are not updated or used as working documents.

The use of individual learning plans

70. In order to be completed effectively, the process of planning learning should culminate in the negotiation of an individual learning plan for each learner. Good individual learning plans pull together the results of the overall initial assessment process, and provide clear information about the learners' education and employment history, their career aims, any additional support needs which have been identified and the support required, and the way in which on- and off-the-job training will be carried out. They contain initial target dates for the completion of NVQ and key skills units, which reflect the specific job role and requirements of each learner, rather than the employer or the training provider. Providers who manage individual learning plans well use them during progress reviews and update them regularly to reflect mutually agreed changes to the learner's learning programme. They ensure that both the learner and employer have updated copies of the learning plan, and that both fully understand it.

Good Practice

Learners benefit from carefully compiled and effectively used individual learning plans. They are produced after a comprehensive initial assessment of learners' potential and reflect genuine individual starting points for each learner. Plans include learning targets which are challenging but achievable. The subsequent training is well planned to meet learners' individual needs. There are regular progress review meetings at which learners' plans can be changed if appropriate. Inspectors observed some very effective progress review meetings involving all the partners in learning.

Good Practice

Individual learning plans are updated every month to record learners' progress, any additional training, and any identified support needs. Learners are involved in preparing, updating and amending their training plans. The plans reflect learners' individual circumstances and are an effective means of recording progress and keeping learners focused on achievement.

71. In many cases, although the data collected through initial assessment are used informally to plan learning and support, the decisions made are not recorded clearly or comprehensively on individual learning plans. Too often, learning plans are poorly detailed documents, containing similar information and the same target dates for whole groups of learners. Such plans do not provide a coherent record of each learner's starting point, needs, abilities, or training programme. They are not updated to reflect progress and are insufficiently valued by the provider, the learner and their employer.

72. The standard of individual learning plans often merits a bullet point judgement of its own in inspection reports. Of the 325 report sections published between April 2001 and December 2002, that make a specific judgement about learning plans, only 6 per cent cite them as a strength. Sixty per cent highlight individual learning plans as a weakness. The use of individual learning plans is particularly poor for construction, retailing, customer service and transportation and hospitality, sport and leisure provision.

Poor Practice

There is inadequate use of individual learning plans. There is poor use of initial assessment and prior learning to develop these plans. Most plans comprise only targets related to the achievement of modules taken within the training programmes learners are following. There is insufficient account taken of individual learning needs, preferred learning styles and short-term targets.

Poor Practice

Individual learning plans are not used effectively. Not all learners have a copy in their portfolio. Some have only a poor-quality photocopy. Other than progress review dates being entered on the assessor's copy, there is no updating of this plan. No record is kept of additional training or completion of units. Target dates for unit completion are undemanding, all showing the learner's programme end date. The plans lack individuality.

Communication and feedback

73. Communicating the relevant outcomes of initial assessment to trainers and assessors, learners, employers and subcontractors, is something done well in only a small number of providers. Although most of those judged to have good initial assessment give prompt and accurate feedback to learners about the results and their implications, many providers do not share the outcomes with employers.

Poor Practice

Employers are not involved in the initial assessment processes. No agreement is made with employers which stipulates their contribution to the training and support of learners. Learners do not have detailed learning plans with agreed targets. Neither learners nor their employers have a clear understanding of the modern apprenticeship frameworks or how long they should take to complete.

74. The failure to ensure that all parties are fully informed about learners' needs and abilities is widespread among providers. This is a particularly significant weakness among those funded primarily by Jobcentre Plus, and within the prison sector. Among Jobcentre Plus-funded providers, communication is frequently poor between providers' staff and the Jobcentre Plus personal advisers who refer learners. These personal advisers have substantial preliminary contact with learners, and sometimes carry out initial assessment activities with them, but the information they collect is often not passed on to providers, who then have to repeat the exercise. This is a waste of time and resources, especially given that some Jobcentre Plus-funded learning programmes are of a short duration. Some learners who have been initially assessed by a personal adviser have to repeat the process once they start their training programme.

Poor Practice

The training provider does not receive enough information from Jobcentre Plus about many clients, and some have been inappropriately referred. In most cases, the training provider does not assess clients' prior learning or experience, which might affect their support needs or the level of challenge required.

Poor Practice

The Jobcentre Plus personal adviser is responsible for organising assessments of clients' basic skills. However, not all clients are referred for basic skills assessments, and some are not identified as needing additional support with literacy until they have started their programmes.

75. In the prison sector, the results of initial assessment are only occasionally passed between establishments within a satisfactory timescale.

Good Practice

Information was passed from a previous prison relating to a learner's basic skills test results, the courses taken and his achievements. This ensured that he started at the appropriate level on a new course and did not have to take another basic skills test unnecessarily.

76. Prisoners are often moved from prison to prison at very short notice, and information about prisoners is not shared between prisons. Prisoners do not necessarily receive the support they need, or follow training at a level which suits them.

Poor Practice

Prison regulations require all potential learners to complete a literacy and numeracy assessment as part of their induction to the education department. Many learners have taken the tests at previous establishments, but the results are not passed between establishments in a timescale that is useful.

77. In addition, there are many examples in prison inspection reports of the results of initial assessment not being shared with teaching staff in the prison when learners start their training.

Poor Practice

All prisoners have their basic numeracy and literacy skills assessed by the education department soon after they arrive at prison. However, the results are not routinely shared with the skills training instructors. Most of the information is kept away from the workshops and individual files are not shared with workshop instructors. Instructors often have to reassess the learners. Instructors are not trained in basic skills assessment and rely on their own judgement in referring learners for additional support. Workshop instructors are not made aware of any medication their learners are taking.

CONCLUSION

78. This report has highlighted obvious difficulties in the way in which initial assessment is managed, administered and used. While a small number of providers deal with the process well, far more misuse, or miss out altogether, key elements of initial assessment. They do not use the results effectively to identify additional support needs or to plan learning. They do not ensure that information about initial assessment reaches all interested parties.

79. However, some encouraging trends are emerging. Government agencies, such as the Learning and Skills Development Agency, are working with providers to tackle the difficulties, and there is a clear agenda for these agencies to work closely with the ALI and OFSTED to implement improvements. In the meantime, the successful efforts by some providers to make their learners' experience of initial assessment a positive and constructive one are reflected in the following case studies.

CASE STUDIES

Asset Training and Consultancy Limited

80. *Asset Training & Consultancy Limited (Asset) is a private training company based in Merseyside. Founded in 1996, the company works with organisations in Manchester, London and Liverpool to provide training for their employees. Asset has until recently concentrated on the over-19 age group, but began offering training programmes to learners aged between 16 and 19 in September 2002. Learners work towards qualifications in engineering, technology and manufacturing, business administration, management and professional, retailing, customer service and transportation and IT. The company has limited resources, and has to meet the needs of a wide range of learners and employers. Staff go out of their way to ensure that they do the very best for their learners, so that the learner achieves the best qualification and progression that is possible. Initial assessment and the accrediting of prior learning are tools which help them to do this well.*

81. *The company is flexible in its approach to the initial assessment of learners, and uses different strategies for different groups of learners. Unemployed learners are invited to Asset's premises for an interview and an initial assessment of their basic skills ability. The results, along with information given during interview, are used to find an appropriate work placement. Learners attend a three-day induction which includes a more detailed literacy and numeracy skills assessment. After their induction, learners begin their work placement. At this stage, a detailed assessment of the learner's job role is carried out. This information is used to plan an individual programme for the learner, which is recorded on their individual learning plan.*

82. *Learners who are already in employment receive an induction in their workplace, during which their job role is analysed, and their numeracy and literacy skills assessed. The information gathered is used to decide which NVQ and which level of qualification each learner should work towards. There have been occasions when an employer has asked Asset to take on a group of workers and train them all to level 2. When assessors have carried out an initial assessment they have found that a level 3 qualification would be more appropriate for the learner, and have persuaded the employer to allow the learner to work towards this level.*

83. *Assessors hold extensive interviews with learners to ascertain their prior learning and experience. The information gathered is matched against the NVQ standards, and used to identify units or elements with which they can be accredited. This ensures that learners do not have to repeat work in which they have already demonstrated competence. Learners whose prior learning is accredited make particularly good progress through their qualifications. In one case a learner who had already achieved NVQs up to level 4 was able to achieve another at level 4 in training and development entirely through APL. Six of the 12 units in the NVQ were accredited directly from qualifications the learner had already achieved; for the other six, she compiled a portfolio of work containing evidence collected previously for other NVQs. The portfolio has been verified by the external verifier and commented on as a very good piece of work. A number of learners who started on New Deal options have, with appropriate use of APL, developed their confidence sufficiently to go on to NVQs up to level 3, with key skills units.*

84. *Asset's managers are constantly reviewing and improving their approach to initial assessment. They have recently replaced paper-based numeracy and literacy tests with a computer package, designed by a college, which is used to assess learners' basic and key skills levels and subsequently to enable learners to further develop these skills. This change has proved very successful. Learners enjoy using*

the computer and find it less daunting, as they don't see the activities involved as a test. Assessors now have the package on laptops, and can use it to carry out initial assessment in the workplace.

Barnsley District General Hospital NHS Trust

85. *Barnsley District General Hospital NHS Trust has its own training centre on the site of Barnsley District General Hospital. It provides training in two occupational areas, business administration and care. The majority of learners are recruited directly from school at the age of 16. A few learners start a year after leaving school.*

86. *The selection process is fair but rigorous. Prospective learners, who have the opportunity to visit the hospital before applying, are assessed against a number of pre-determined criteria, including school attendance and reports, communication, interest and attitude, and the results of a basic skills test. They receive a percentage score for their performance against each aspect, with 65 per cent being the cut-off point for acceptance. There are a maximum number of places available each year. If fewer learners obtain 65 per cent than there are places available, some places go unfilled – the pass mark is not lowered to ensure maximum capacity.*

87. *Once learners have been selected, the initial assessment process continues during the induction programme, which takes up the first three weeks of training. The induction includes a work taster lasting three days, and further tests of key and basic skills. The results of these tests are summarised, and, along with the learner's experience of the work taster and the information gathered during the selection process, are used to determine a suitable work placement. All the results are reflected in an individual learning plan for each learner. Learners who have been identified as having additional learning needs are given extra tuition one afternoon a week, on top of the normal two half-days off-the-job training. This extra training provides support with basic and key skills.*

88. *The initial assessment process has been modified over the years and is now very successful. Rates of achievement are 70 per cent for both areas of learning. The proportion of learners obtaining full-time employment in 2001-2 was over 85 per cent in care and 100 per cent in administration. For the current year, the comparative figures so far are 78 per cent for care and 88 per cent for administration. The provider listens to feedback from learners and staff when refining the initial assessment and support processes. Changes are made regularly. For example, one of the initial assessment tests now requires learners to handwrite a letter, as staff understand that some learners may have received help with their letter of application, which may not provide a true reflection of the learner's abilities. In the provision of additional support, staff have found that learners are reluctant to attend sessions designated as basic skills, and have changed the name of such sessions, whilst retaining the same content.*

Developing Initiatives for Support in the Community

89. *Developing Initiatives for Support in the Community (DISC) specialises in working with marginalised learners, many of whom have significant barriers to employability, including homelessness, and problems with literacy and numeracy. DISC's initial assessment is highly effective in identifying learners' barriers to employability, making tutorial staff and work-placement providers aware of these barriers. It ensures that learners follow a programme of learning which is right for them, and that they are given the support they need. Learners are fully involved in the process.*

90. *Potential learners attend DISC for an interview, during which the interviewer obtains very comprehensive information about the learner's education and training history, their health and personal circumstances and their occupational and personal interests. The interviewer then prepares an individual support assessment sheet, which looks at a range of barriers to employability, and assesses how much support the learner will require to overcome each barrier. The findings are summarised on a personal profile which also details the support requirements of each learner. This is a time-consuming, but highly informative process. It provides good, in-depth knowledge about each learner and their individual needs.*

91. *Initial assessment continues during the learner's comprehensive induction which takes place over two weeks. Learners complete a learning styles assessment, which shows how they prefer both to learn and to be assessed. Individual learning activities are planned based on the information gathered. A skills audit is carried out to identify the occupational areas which interest learners, and to help tutors find suitable work placements. Learners are observed as they work together, and as they work on specific assignments, to gather more information about their personal and social needs. There is good use of diagnostic testing. A dyslexia screening assessment is used if a learner is identified as possibly being dyslexic. If the test suggests the learner is dyslexic, a formal dyslexia assessment is arranged with a specialist agency. Learners take the Basic Skills Agency tests in literacy and numeracy.*

92. *The learner and their tutor work together to draw up an individual learning plan during the first two weeks of training. This document is used to guide learning and to provide the framework against which progress is assessed. It contains a summary of the information gathered during initial assessment, a list of the learner's support requirements, and a statement of the learner's goals, with short-term targets and initial milestones set. The individual learning plan is amended and updated as the learner proceeds through their qualification.*

Rolls Royce plc

93. Rolls Royce plc is one of the worlds leading engineering companies. At the Derby site, gas turbine engines are built for use in aerospace. The company recruits modern apprentices for employment at Rolls Royce plc, providing training in engineering. The majority of learners are recruited directly from school. In addition to NVQ and key skills training, modern apprentices also take college course at B Tech and HNC level and many technical apprentices are offered company sponsorship up to degree level.

94. Rolls Royce plc participates in the annual LSCs career event, as well as running its own open evening. Applications for the training programmes are judged against clear criteria. Short-listed applicants should be aged under 19 on commencement of training, hold four GCSEs which must include English, mathematics and science, and show a basic interest in engineering, demonstrated through school projects, hobbies or work experience. All prospective learners who meet these criteria are invited for an ability test session, comprising tests in numerical reasoning, technical understanding, mechanical comprehension and spatial recognition. Applicants are sent useful preparation material which allows them to practise the tests in advance. Several learners commented on how useful this had been, and how it had boosted their confidence. The candidates successful in the ability tests (58 per cent in 2002) are invited for interview. At interview, among other topics, they are asked questions about the practise materials they were sent, not to test their understanding, but to establish their interest, and their willingness to prepare for selection.

95. Induction takes place over a period of three months. During the first week, learners' individual learning plans are written, drawing on the information gathered from tests and interviews, and taking into account learners' preferences on job roles. No learners have been identified as having additional learning needs, but the company has ample resources to provide any necessary support, including an on-site **learnirect** programme, and two outreach centres providing basic skills support to members of the local community.

96. Rolls Royce plc has made a number of changes to improve the recruitment and initial assessment of learners. One such project is to involve current learners in organising recruitment events in schools. These learners have attended training on presentation and IT skills and have produced a session including a presentation showing the work of Rolls Royce plc, and practical activities. This has provided them with very good key skills evidence. The project is in its early stages, but already there is an increase in the number of applicants from the schools who have had a presentation. The company is also actively seeking to recruit minority ethnic learners, using a variety of strategies. In particular, research has shown that candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds find difficulty with two of the ability tests, so in 2003, selectors are going to waive the results of these two tests and recruit minority ethnic applicants who pass all other aspects of the recruitment process.

RWP Training and Development

97. Based in Cumbria, RWP Training and Development (RWP) provides government-funded training in a range of occupational areas, as well as offering private training and business consultancy. The company has a thorough and well-planned approach to initial assessment. The strategies used give very realistic portrayal of learners' abilities, and lead to particularly careful matching of learners and employers. Learners are clear about the occupational programmes offered and whether they meet their aspirations. Good initial assessment has had a significant impact on retention and achievement. Among foundation modern apprentices, retention has risen from 10 per cent to 100 per cent, and achievement from 22 per cent to 85 per cent. On the advanced modern apprenticeship, retention has risen from 35 per cent to 70 per cent and achievement from 35 per cent to 65 per cent. The time spent in initially assessing the learner has the added benefit of demonstrating an interest in them and a willingness to support them.

98. Applicants complete an application form, and are invited to attend a half-day selection event at RWP. The arrangements for this are flexible. If learners prefer it to take place in their workplace, or over two shorter sessions, this can be accommodated. During the half day, prospective learners are given information about the company and their potential qualification; they are interviewed, and they take a series of commercially designed literacy and numeracy tests. The outcomes of these tests are used in the decision as to whether they work towards a foundation or advanced modern apprenticeship. Engineering applicants take an additional psychometric test, and a colour vision test. Learners are given particularly clear messages about what their training will involve, what they can expect of RWP, and what commitment will be required of them in return. Applicants receive immediate feedback on their performance, and are informed after a few days as to whether they have gained a place. Unsuccessful applicants are referred to Connexions, or to other local training providers.

99. Once they have started their programme, learners' key skills levels are identified, and their strengths and weaknesses diagnosed, using a computerised, commercially designed package. The information gathered is used to plan individual key skills support for learners.

100. The information gathered during initial assessment is used in finding appropriate employment opportunities. Employers are sent curriculum vitae from learners, which contain basic and key skills test results, but omit learners' addresses, to prevent employers from making stereotyped assumptions about learners based on the residential areas they come from. Once learners have been matched to an employer, a detailed analysis is made of their job role, and is used to determine which NVQ units the learner will work towards, and to plan a suitable and co-ordinated programme of on- and off-the-job training. Initial target dates are identified for the completion of units.

101. Learners moving from a foundation to an advanced modern apprenticeship are given a further initial assessment, comprising an occupational skills assessment to assess whether the learner's job role gives opportunities to fulfil all the NVQ and key skills requirements of the new qualification, and, where appropriate, a further assessment of the learner's key skills to assess the level at which the learner is working.

102. Several members of staff have attended various training events in initial assessment, including the Saville and Holdsworth occupational testing programme and a course in motivational interviewing.

West Anglia Further Education College

103. *West Anglia Further Education College has contracts with Norfolk LSC, Cambridge LSC and with Jobcentre Plus for work-based learning. The provision covers a range of areas of learning and accommodates nearly 500 work-based learners. The provision is managed by two senior training advisers reporting to the head of student services and support. Nine training advisers oversee work-based learners' programmes. Each is attached to a curriculum area of the college.*

104. *The college takes an holistic approach to initial assessment. Once a referral has been made, the training advisers conduct an intensive individual interview that takes approximately three hours. The interview is highly structured and there are very clear guidelines for staff to follow. At this time, learners also complete an initial assessment of their basic skills and/or key skills ability. Learners applying for electrical courses also take a colour-vision test, and plumbers take a vocational aptitude assessment. Trainers are skilled in interpreting the results of these assessments and give learners feedback on the day. Trainers have attended a one-day training course on initial assessment and motivational behavioural workshops and have had training in interview techniques. There are regular opportunities for them to update these skills in the form of fortnightly planned training workshops, which alternate with staff meetings.*

105. *Potential employers are also carefully assessed to find out what the employers offer and to establish what skills, attitudes and characteristics are best suited to the job and the employer. This information is used, together with that gained from the learner's initial assessment, to find the right match of employer and learner. Once a match is made, the learner has an interview with the employer. If successful, the learner is offered a four-week trial with the employer. At the end of this period, the employer, the learner and the training adviser get together for a formal review. Contracts are then signed and the learner is enrolled at the college for off-the-job training. An individual learning plan for each learner is drawn up by the training adviser, in consultation with college tutors, employers and the learner. Any support needs identified are quickly dealt with.*

106. *Initial assessment is effectively quality assured. Its effectiveness is continually reviewed, and trainers' ability to administer initial assessments and to make good use of the results is ensured through fortnightly training sessions.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

107. We would like to thank the following employers and training providers who helped with the production of this report by facilitating extra visits and giving their time in providing examples of good practice:

Asset Training and Consultancy Limited
Barnsley District General Hospital NHS Trust
Developing Initiatives for Support in the Community
Rolls Royce plc
RWP Training and Development
West Anglia Further Education College

REFERENCE SOURCES

108. *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 2001-2*, ALI;
Improving initial assessment in work-based learning, LSDA;
Initial assessment and learning plans, QSiS publications.

www.basic-skills.co.uk

www.dfes.gov.uk/keyskills

www.keyskillssupport.net/