National College for
Teaching & Leadership

The Assessment Only route to QTS

Key features

July 2013

Contents

Introduction

In March 2013, the Teaching Agency (TA) undertook a review of the Assessment Only (AO) route, based on materials and cohort data submitted by 22 providers and the outcomes of follow-up telephone discussions with key personnel in each of these providers.

Overall, the AO route is working well. Few candidates withdraw after registration and almost all compete successfully.

This paper draws on the March review. It summarises characteristics of AO candidates, gives attention to each identified stage in the AO process, summarising its typical features and noting additional elements included in some routes, then highlights providers' key development priorities. Finally, it identifies a number of points that providers may wish to consider further.

Please note, the areas identified in this paper are not intended to determine the design of the AO route, but to share elements of current provision for all AO providers to consider.

Cohort characteristics

22 providers were contacted by telephone for the survey, of which 21 returned cohort data – this is the source of all figures given here unless otherwise specified.

- 213 teachers from the 21 providers successfully completed the AO route in 2011/12. As the survey was carried out part-way through the year, the figures for 2012/13 were incomplete but from the numbers already recruited it would appear that the number completing will be greater than in 2011/12.

- In 2011/12, 72% of those completing were female; in 2012/13, 64% of those recruited so far were female.

- 15% of those completing in 2011/12 and 19% of those recruited in 2012/13 were identified as BME.

- Overseas trained teachers (OTTs) made up 7% of those completing in 2011/12, whereas the proportion recruited in 2012/13 was 17%.

- The AO route appears to attract more secondary teachers than primary teachers. In 2011/12, 53% were assessed for the 11-16 age range and a further 20% for the 14-19 age range. In 2012/13, 45% of those recruited were being assessed for the 11-16 age range and 15% for 14-19 age range. The proportion of those being assessed for the 3-7 age range rose from 6% to 12% over the two years.

- For 2011/12, 68% of those completing were employed in maintained schools, 21% in academies and 11% in independent schools. In 2012/13, 55% of those recruited were employed in maintained schools, 24% in academies and 22% in independent schools.

- For each of the two cohorts, the modal category for years of experience is over five years, with 53% falling into this category in 2011/12 and 51% in 2012/13.

- The second highest frequency for both cohorts was in the 2-3 years category, with 22% in 2011/12, and 25% 2012/13.

- Of those completing in 2011/12, 43% had honours degrees at 2.1 or above with 17% having unclassified degrees. In 2012/13, 44% had degrees at 2.1 or above, with 24% having unclassified degrees. Most of the unclassified degrees were achieved in non-UK universities that do not award honours degrees.

Recruitment

Typical features

- Interest is triggered largely through personal contacts, often during provider visits to partner schools.

- Enquiries arise from scanning the TA/NCTL website.

- Follow-up telephone or email enquiries are used to clarify expectations.

- Provider websites provide clear information and include useful internal and external links.

- Administrators are well primed to judge eligibility, handle excessive numbers of inappropriate enquirers and suggest alternatives.

- Increasingly, publicity takes account of regional schools beyond the provider's partnership.

Additional points

- Websites are enhanced, for instance by:
  - summary profiles of successful candidates;
  - links to YouTube interviews with successful candidates;
  - links to headteacher endorsements of the route;
  - detailed responses to FAQs.
- Well-presented flyers and posters are circulated to schools.
- Awareness of the route is raised during:
  - partnership events, such as mentor briefings and HT conferences;
  - wider ITT recruitment events, for instance hosted by universities.
- Social media are employed, in particular Twitter and Facebook.

Prior to the interview

Typical features

- Arrangements are in place to ensure that only suitable candidates apply to this route.

- Further email and telephone contacts clarify requirements and expectations further: how the route works; the application and assessment processes; what the school and candidate must do; and fee arrangements.

- Information packs or handbooks, frequently online, provide further clarification of each element in the route and, often, offer specific guidance to particular categories of candidates, such as HLTAs or those working in special schools.

- Application forms are usually arranged in two sections to secure accurate information from the candidate and clear confirmation from the school.

- Copies of all relevant certification are required at the application stage, as well as any NARIC endorsements and verification of CRB/DBS disclosure.

- Candidates are provided with templates and advice to help them undertake an initial self-assessment against the standards, create a development plan to tackle any identified shortfalls and compile an initial portfolio of evidence against the standards. The outcomes are brought to interview.

- Once submitted, completed application forms are sifted against specified criteria, copies of certification are checked, and queries are followed up at once.

Additional points

- Additional arrangements to reduce the number of applications from ineligible candidates include:

  - short online forms, in one case with separate primary and secondary versions, capture basic personal details, thus allowing early checks on eligibility and school support;

  - an early provider visit to the employing school clarifies expectations;

  - regular information evenings include presentations setting out expectations;

  - the application form has been removed from the provider's website in order to ensure telephone discussion between prospective candidate and route leader;

  - a separate application form is completed by OTTs applying to this route.

- Additional arrangements to confirm information about the candidate and secure accurate information about the school include:

  - the headteacher of the employing school completes a discrete form or letter; guidance makes clear that the application will not be processed without it;

- the chair of the school's governing body signs to confirm the information alongside the headteacher;
- details of referees (sometimes two) are required, very occasionally with highly specific guidance on what the reference should include;
- the most recent school inspection report is scrutinised;
- selection criteria are set out for non-partnership schools. These include access to specialist resources and support; previous ITT experience; and compliance with an AO partnership agreement.

- Particularly detailed information is requested about:

  - the candidate's current teaching commitments;
  - the ITT expertise and experience of school-based assessors/mentors;
  - any other school(s) where the candidate might work as part of the route, e.g. any second school;
  - the practical equipment available for practical subjects;
  - aspects of the candidate's professional expertise, such as their English and communication skills, their resilience, or their organisational and management competencies.

- In a few cases, candidates or headteachers are asked to submit additional material:

  - the CVs of mentors;
  - a completed chart, grading 15 expectations of the candidate, related to: qualifications; employment experience; motivation for teaching; skill as a team player; quality of oral presentation; literacy; numeracy; and subject, pedagogic and curriculum knowledge. Specified grade descriptors are set out for each expectation;
  - the candidate's teaching timetable;
  - a recent lesson observation by a senior teacher in the school;
  - a completed Health and Safety Audit;
  - a partnership agreement signed by the headteacher.

- Additional guidance is provided in, or alongside, the application form.

  - An attached guide explains how to complete each section of the application form.
  - The application form makes clear that equivalent qualifications are acceptable or that equivalence testing is available.
  - The purpose of the personal statement is clarified.
  - A checklist of essential information and enclosures is attached.
  - Fee arrangements are described.

- Any candidate likely to succeed at interview is registered with the university in advance of the interview so that they can use the provider's VLE guidance and electronic portfolio system.

- Templates and guidance related to self-assessment, creating a development plan and compiling a portfolio of evidence are very precise, phase-focused and supported by effective exemplification.
- Checklists sharpen the sifting of application forms.
  - A detailed two-part checklist supports the administrator in checking eligibility and the route leader in checking suitability.
  - A detailed checklist of requirements is scored against well-defined criteria.

The interview process

Typical features

- The majority of interviews take place in the employing school, thus providing first-hand evidence of competence and a context for probing early self-assessment, development planning and evidence collected against the standards.

- Interviewers usually include representatives of the provider and the school.

- Candidates are given advance notice of the interview process and clear guidance on what they need to bring to it.

- The interview process usually includes:

  - a lesson observation and debriefing, often jointly by provider and school representatives;

  - scrutiny and discussion of the outcomes of self-assessment, development planning and the evidence collected to date against the standards;

  - a presentation by the candidate to the interviewing panel, such as micro teaching or a formal exposition, for instance of an aspect of teaching, an educational issue, a teaching resource brought to interview, or a topic taught;

  - formal questioning by the panel, including both general and phase/subject specific questions and both common and individualised questions;

  - discussion between provider representatives and school representatives, commonly a senior teacher and/or mentor, in order to identify the suitability of the candidate's subject expertise and the scale and scope of their teaching;

  - checks on original certification, for instance to confirm identity, CRB/DBS and skills tests status, and qualifications including any NARIC endorsements.

- The AO route and its implications are clarified for both school and candidate, including the requirement to have taught in two schools and the need for up-to-date evidence against all the standards.

- Interview records support consistency of approach and equitable judgements, for instance: by securing common, phase-specific, and subject-specific questions and tasks; by setting out clearly defined grade descriptors for judging responses to each question and task; by logging checks on key requirements; and by summarising any conditions or targets to be met.

- Outcomes are communicated rapidly, for instance within five days of the AO route selection panel, by letter or by email with a report attached. Reasons for the interview decision are made clear and guidance is provided, as relevant, on what needs to be done before any further application.

- The start date (registration) for embarking on the route after a successful interview is tied to readiness for assessment and thus, also, the fulfilment of any conditions, such as submitting a completed initial needs analysis. Hence, the registration date is determined by the projected date of the final assessment, thus ensuring that assessment can be undertaken within the required three month period. Within this overriding imperative registration dates vary, for instance a candidate can be registered:
  - immediately after a successful interview;
  - at any point after a successful interview dependent on further progress in meeting identified needs/shortfalls in evidence against the standards;
  - at a date which takes account of examination periods, i.e. to ensure that three months after registration does not fall in any examination period.

Additional points

- Additional features of some interviews include:
  - a first central interview followed by a second interview in school;
  - discussion with the candidate's line manager;
  - scrutiny of the school's observations of the candidate teaching;
  - auditing of subject knowledge;
  - highly focused literacy tests to check spelling, grammar/punctuation, accuracy, vocabulary, comprehension, written communication.
- Providers take the opportunity of the interview to gauge further the level and quality of potential school support.
- Interview records include separate versions for primary and secondary candidates.
- Interview records expect standards-related judgements and grading.
- Where the interview evidence is insufficient to reach a decision:
  - a further visit is made to observe more teaching;
  - the provider representative seeks immediate guidance from central personnel.

Fees

Typical features

- The fees charged across this sample of providers range from £1000 to £3800, with most clustering between £1500 and £2500.

- In some cases there have been adjustments since the first year, or changes are planned for next year.

- The provider charging £1000 plans to increase this fee next year.

- Providers often related the fees to the cost of paying tutors to interview, visit schools and carry out the final assessment.

- In some parts of the country, applicants are charged around twice as much as in other parts for what appear to be similar time and personnel commitments.

- Most providers stagger the payments, often linked to particular activities. For instance, they may charge a non-returnable fee for the interview.

- Providers are becoming increasingly sensitive to travel and subsistence costs for visits outside of the region in which they are based and this is contributing to more provision being local or regional, rather than national.

- The collection of fees appears to be working well; there were only two cases reported where there were disputes about who was responsible for paying fees.

Additional points

- A few providers do not explain how the staggered fee structure relates to different activities or stages of the provision.

- By contrast, one provider breaks the total fee of £1400 down into fees for: initial discussion/needs analysis; initial training and support for school-based staff; two monitoring visits; final assessment day and external moderation

- Only two providers now consider themselves to be truly 'national' providers.

- Some providers consider the school to be responsible for paying the fee, even when the candidate is paying most, or all, of it themselves.

- Some providers report that financial support from the school for candidates can be contingent on their agreement to stay at the school for a set number of years after gaining QTS.

Pre-assessment

Typical features

- AO provision from the interview to the formal final assessment visit varies considerably. Different approaches include the following examples:

  - the candidate is interviewed in the school, with joint lesson observations, needs analysis and examination of current evidence. The mentor then undertakes to guide and support the applicant to the final assessment visit.

  - As above, but the assessor visits at an interim stage to check progress.

  - The interview and initial assessment is held in the school, followed by two more progress checking visits before the final assessment, which is undertaken by a different person from the person checking progress.

- In all cases, acceptance for the AO route is dependent on having a suitable mentor in the school.

- Providers set out expectations for the number of written lesson observations needed, which varies from four to ten.

- Handbooks and other guidance explain clearly how evidence should be collected and presented.

Additional points

- There are instances where suggested evidence refers to activities and processes rather than the clear demonstration of competence.

- In one case, the provider's web site contains a series of templates that can be used to log every aspect of the programme, including a record of the second school prior experience.

- In some cases providers introduce supplementary conditions such as:

  - if teaching in an independent school, the second setting must be in a maintained school or an academy;

  - the candidate must show that they can plan, teach and assess over a given time interval in the second setting;

  - if the school in which they are employed is graded as requiring improvement by Ofsted, the second setting must be in school graded as good or outstanding.

Final assessment

Typical features

- The time interval between registration and assessment varies from six weeks to the full 12 weeks.

- There is no evidence of any misunderstanding about the maximum time allowed between registration and assessment.

- Often, assessment takes place before the end of the full twelve weeks to allow enough time after final assessment but before the end of the assessment period to present supplementary evidence, if needed.

- In some cases there are difficulties when the assessment period covers holiday breaks. In a few cases, providers did not take advantage of the flexibility of registration dates to avoid holiday periods.

- Almost all providers stressed the importance they place on the quality of the assessor carrying out the final assessment. They recognise the need for assessors to be able to confirm that candidates awarded QTS through the AO route are comparable to those awarded QTS after following training routes. Most secure this by insisting that a subject or phase specialist is used to assess candidates and that the assessor has had previous experience in assessing ITT.

- Where necessary, providers train assessors specifically for this route often shadowing an experienced assessor before undertaking an assessment on their own.

- Larger providers draw on the services of tutors they employ for mainstream routes, whereas smaller providers often use retired or serving teachers from partnership schools who have been employed previously to assess school-based trainees.

- In all cases, the final assessment includes observation of teaching, but the amount of teaching required to be seen varies. When this is taken together with the variation in the number of lessons seen at interview or pre-assessment, there could be very large differences in the amount of teaching seen by the assessor.

- Assessors also check the evidence in portfolios and reports from mentors and others to confirm that the standards have been met.

- Even where reports have been compiled by mentors and evidence is clearly signposted, there is a lot for an assessor to cover in one day.

- The task is easier when original documents have been checked earlier and interim visits have confirmed some of the evidence.

- There is a very large variation in the amount of detail required in the final assessment templates, which are usually used for moderation, rather than the portfolios of

evidence. The templates always require the assessor to state whether the standards have been met.

Apart from those who failed the skills tests[1], few, if any, candidates fail this route. Providers point out that this is because of the care taken to register only those candidates who are already able to demonstrate many of the standards and the support given to help them compile evidence.Additional points

- In a few cases, the AO route manager carries out the assessment rather than a specialist. In these cases, the route manager is dependent on the judgements of the specialist mentor.

- Some providers always use two assessors, often including one of the route managers and a specialist. This has particular strengths in enabling on-site moderation between the assessors and the mentor to take place.

- In a few weaker examples the assessment template focuses too much on checking that the processes have been carried out as expected with an overall conclusion from the assessor that the standards have been met. In these cases it is difficult to see how the judgements can be moderated.

- In one case, a specialist visits three times, including for the initial interview day, but the final assessment is carried out by a different specialist to offer a more independent judgement.

- There are mixed views across the providers interviewed about whether the candidate should be graded, in line with trainees on mainstream or employment-based routes. Many do not, but are considering whether they should, others have decided firmly against grading, and some record a grade alongside their final assessment decision.

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[1] Before January 2013 all AO candidates had to complete the skills test before their assessment period expired, as opposed to before starting (as now).

Quality assurance

Typical features

- The route employs the quality assurance systems, materials and instruments used on other routes.

- Most candidates are employed by schools whose ITT expertise can be guaranteed.

- Tutors who support the AO route leader have substantial ITT experience, which helps assure quality.

- Where suitable tutors are not readily available, for instance in respect of particular secondary subjects, relevant specialist expertise is contracted in from other local providers.

- A measure of professional development is in place for tutors, for instance briefing sessions, development days, and/or shadowing.

- AO handbooks or websites set out the provider-wide complaint and appeal procedures which apply to the AO route; they are careful to point out that employment-based complaints should be addressed through the employing school's complaints procedure.

Additional points

- Professional development is provided for AO tutors, through AO tutor away days and regular meetings between AO tutors and/or with wider whole-course, secondary or primary teams.

- Evaluations of the AO process and the materials it employs include: feedback on each aspect of the process, its timing and the clarity of guidance; feedback both before and after the final assessment.

- Plans are in place to strengthen and extend formal stakeholder evaluations, for instance by:

  - using time released from skills tests practice to complete evaluations;

  - building written evaluation into the assessment day;

  - introducing school self-evaluation in respect of the AO route;

  - asking schools to evaluate the provider's role in the AO route.

- The quality of AO processes is considered at wider team meetings, alongside the review of other routes.

- The quality assurance of the interview process includes: route leader participation in every interview; determination of the interview decision by an AO route selection

panel rather than on the interview day; the involvement of a subject specialist from another route at secondary interviews.

- School and candidate records from the period between interview and final assessment are scrutinised to check the consistency and quality of the candidate's experiences.

- An external specialist visits to check specialist progress and support.

- A local provider is employed to judge the effectiveness of the AO process from interview to final assessment.

- The quality of school support is recorded, for instance in the record of the final assessment or on a specified template, and communicated formally to the school at the end of AO process.

- All assessor records are collected and scrutinised to review their sharpness and reliability, in order to identify both shortfalls and effective practice with a view to using findings to strengthen the rigour of assessment.

- The external assessor, moderator or examiner checks quality during visits to schools, meetings with tutors, and/or attendance at quality assurance meetings, with judgements and recommendations outlined in a resulting report.

- Monitoring tools ensure that all planned elements of each process in the AO route take place as intended, for instance:

  - a tracking form records the dated completion of each aspect of each process;
  - an online template records key programme activities;
  - a log records mentor experiences.

- Formal end-of-year reviews identify development points: a mini SED for this route identifies development points leading to a formal route-specific development plan.

- The outcomes of an AO route review are to be compared with the outcomes of other route reviews.

- A steering group with stakeholder representatives is being put in place, a development arising from one 2011/12 provider's end-of-year review.

Moderation

Typical features

- Moderation arrangements employ the same processes, instruments and, often, personnel as other routes.

- Paired assessment - by an assessor and a school representative - of teaching and feedback during final assessment secures internal moderation.

Additional points

- Final assessment is undertaken by an assessor other than the assessor who has been working with the candidate.

- Assessors other than the assessor who has been working with the candidate sample final assessment visits, in one larger provider a 10% sample.

- Internal review, assessment or examination boards or team meetings, all of which comprise experienced ITT personnel, scrutinise assessor reports and/or (though more rarely) candidate portfolios to judge the accuracy of assessments.

- External moderation of the AO route is built into the external moderation arrangements of other routes. Thus the external moderator:

  - attends all assessment and examination boards;

  - visits selected AO candidates in school to observe teaching, jointly if possible, and scrutinise all evidence of meeting the standards;

  - reviews a sample of portfolios;

  - compiles a final report, either discretely for this route or as part of wider report on provision across the provider, which includes judgements on the accuracy of assessment on this route.

- Existing external moderation arrangements are used flexibly, for instance by organising visits to AO candidates prior to final assessment or after successful final assessment or by retaining portfolios of evidence for subsequent scrutiny for moderation purposes.

Areas for providers to consider further

The review of the AO route identified a number of areas which would benefit from closer attention by providers in order to clarify and sharpen expectations and ensure appropriate alignment with national policy and requirements.

Recruitment

- Using analyses of intake data in order to:

  - target marketing, for instance on independent schools and men;
  - review expectations about the length of previous teaching experience necessary to ensure suitability for an Assessment Only route.

- Looking again at the conditions imposed on some candidates in respect of the requirement to have taught in two schools and the need to have up-to-date evidence of competence against all the standards. Some enquirers have taught in only one school; others have taught in two or more schools but of the same type; and others, notably HLTAs, instructors working in special schools and independent schools, those working as short term supply teachers, or those teaching only one age range or only one or two specialist subjects in primary age ranges have not taken full responsibility, over a substantial period of time, for classes, or large enough classes, in both training age ranges. Typical responses to such circumstances include:

  - special school candidates are expected to apply with a mainstream partner school (as well as their employing school) in which they can be assessed during a four-week teaching block;
  - candidates not currently teaching two age ranges are expected to be assessed teaching classes in the second age range (normally taught by another teacher) and to demonstrate sufficient previous teaching of that age range;
  - those employed in the independent sector are expected to gain experience in a maintained school irrespective of the number and range of the independent schools in which they have worked;
  - a second school is expected to offer a complementary or contrasting experience.

  While all such expectations are made clear to candidates, they sometimes exceed statutory expectations.

- Reviewing approaches to recruiting candidates who are not currently employed. Some providers refuse to accept such candidates irrespective of the availability of suitable evidence. Others expect an appropriate school to be identified for assessment against the standards in both training age ranges, sometimes arranged by the provider, for instance from within the partnership.

- Giving further thought to assessment arrangements for candidates teaching in schools in special measures and schools requiring improvement. The conditions imposed can carry the implication that unqualified teachers working in such schools will be unable to demonstrate that they are meeting the standards. Current approaches include:
  - refusing to accept any candidate working in a school in special measures;
  - accepting a candidate in a school requiring improvement:
    - only if the most recent inspection report indicates strengths in key areas such as the relevant secondary specialist subject department,
    - only if they undertake a long placement in a school judged by Ofsted to be outstanding or good.

Prior to the interview

- Reviewing all guidance, handbooks and the partnership agreement to remove any features or terminology better suited to the route for which they were originally designed, usually OTTP or GTP. The inclusion of such terminology and features is potentially confusing to AO candidates and their schools.

The interview process

- Adjusting the interview process to secure greater rigour in cases where:
  - a reliance on central interviews gives no opportunity to undertake observations of teaching or hold discussions with key managers;
  - the length of the interview is relatively short: the length varies between one and two hours when held centrally and between half a day and a full day when held in school;
  - phase and/or subject specialists are confined to school representation;
  - no specialist or/and school representative is involved;
  - national priority areas, such as behaviour management and SEND are not addressed;
  - the templates employed to record the outcomes of the interview are so complex that the centrality of the standards to the AO process is masked.
- Revisiting arrangements for auditing subject and primary curriculum knowledge to ensure that candidates are clear about any shortfalls and know how to make good any such deficits and have sufficient time so to do, before they are accepted on to the route.
- Thinking further about any decision to remove additional literacy and numeracy tests from the interview process.

Pre-assessment

- Focusing on evidence to show that standards are met, rather than monitoring processes such as mentor meetings.

Assessment

- Examining the phase and subject specialist knowledge of assessors. Specialist expertise cannot be guaranteed where the route leader undertakes most of the work with AO candidates.

- Considering whether the assessment template contains sufficiently precise information to facilitate moderation procedures.

- Considering whether there has been sufficient observation of teaching throughout the process to ensure that judgements related to teaching standards are reliable.

- Reviewing the assessment process to ensure that assessments focus on teachers meeting the standards rather than writing about the standards.

Quality assurance

- Requesting formal and timely evaluations of the AO route from AO candidates and schools.

- In compiling self-evaluation documents and development plans, ensuring suitable attention to the AO route.

Moderation

- Clarifying the differences between moderation (i.e. arrangements for ensuring secure judgements at pass/fail and grade boundaries in line with national expectations) and wider aspects of quality assurance, as where external moderators visit prior to final assessment to make quality assurance judgements and recommendations or where paired assessments take place during early visits and/or during the interview process to standardise judgements.

- Considering ways of securing cost effective external moderation, given low numbers and the variable timing of final assessments.

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