

The Assessment and Accreditation of Essential Skills at Levels 1 and 2

Background

The Department of Employment and Learning strategy for improving literacy and numeracy (Essential Skills) of adults in Northern Ireland includes:

- a core curriculum for adult literacy and numeracy;
- initial assessment arrangements;
- an Essential Skills qualification;
- a recording/tracking system for learners; and
- professional development arrangements and appropriate qualification(s) for tutors.

CCEA, as the regulatory authority in Northern Ireland for the Essential Skills Qualification, provided advice on the nature of assessment for adult learners at Entry level in December 2002. This advice was accepted and a pilot of the Essential Skills Qualification at Entry level has been operating since February 2003. Awarding Bodies are currently being accredited to offer the qualification at Entry level from September 2003. This further advice covers arrangements for the Essential Skills Qualification at Levels 1 and 2.

Link to Key Skills at Levels 1 and 2

In its strategy document, the Department emphasised the need for the assessment of Essential Skills at Levels 1 and 2 to take account of the assessment arrangements for Key Skills. Currently, the assessment of Key Skills (Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology) includes two elements – tests and portfolio evidence. The tests alone lead to the Basic Skills qualification. CCEA is collaborating with QCA and ACCAC in the current review of Key Skills; issues have been raised in relation to the appropriateness (or otherwise) of the use of tests and the manageability of the portfolio of evidence.

The Council supports a strategy to broaden the scope of the Essential Skills qualification to replace the present Key Skills Qualification. The Essential Skills Qualification at Levels 1 and 2 would be offered in:

- Communication; and
- Application of Number.

An issue that needs to be addressed, however, is the Basic Skills tests. These tests are currently offered at Levels 1 and 2. CCEA sees these tests remaining at present but wishes to see a move away from Basic Skills to Essential Skills within a fixed period of say three years. During the period of transition, CCEA would provide advice to promote the benefits of taking the Essential Skills qualification.

Assessment arrangement at Levels 1 and 2

The Council believes that the assessment of progress from Entry level to Level 1 and Level 2 in Essential Skills should be based on the judgment of tutors – with the support and information provided by high quality standardised tasks set in appropriate contexts and, for Levels 1 and 2, portfolio evidence.

TASKS

The tasks at Levels 1 and 2 would be used, as is the case for Entry level, by tutors when they judge that a learner is working at a particular level. Tutors will not be permitted to assist learners with the tasks. CCEA recommends that task production should be controlled through a central agency in order that agreed standards are maintained. Such arrangements are being put in place for Entry level. As a further safeguard to standards, the CCEA recommends that awarding bodies offering the Essential Skills qualification should be required to operate a system of centre approval. This would cover:

- the professional qualification/training of tutors;
- arrangements for learners to take the tasks;
- internal moderation of the marking of the tasks.

The following criteria should be used when tasks are being developed.

- Tasks should be aligned with the core curriculum for Literacy and Numeracy and should take account of exemplar activities. The tasks should assess ability to apply skills in real-life contexts.
- Separate tasks should be developed for Literacy and Numeracy at each of Levels 1 and 2. The tasks in Literacy should cover the three identified sub-skills (Speaking and listening, Reading and Writing) and in Numeracy, the three curriculum areas (Number; Measures, shape and space; and Handling data).
- The tasks should be supported by tutor guidance which would include detailed mark schemes.
- In developing tasks, the target time for completion should be between 60 and 90 minutes for an average learner. The nature of the tasks should allow flexibility in their use. Completion could be planned by a tutor over a number of sessions agreed with the learner.

PORTFOLIO EVIDENCE

The portfolio requirements need to be manageable for the learner and should fit naturally into the teaching. Portfolios would be marked internally and moderated externally. CCEA will provide guidance to centres on the nature of activities that can provide evidence for the portfolio. This guidance will support group work and indicate how a range of activities can be integrated within the portfolio.

At Levels 1 and 2, tasks would contribute 50% to the total assessment with portfolio evidence providing the further 50%.

Accreditation of Essential Skills Qualification at Levels 1 and 2

CCEA is currently collaborating with QCA and ACCAC to enable the Essential Skills Qualification at Entry level to be accredited within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). It is intended that the Entry level accreditation will be completed by the end of July 2003. CCEA

will then pursue the extension of the accreditation to cover Essential Skills at Levels 1 and 2 with a view to completing this further accreditation by July 2004.

Pilot Arrangements for Levels 1 and 2

As with the Entry level Essential Skills, it will be important that there is in place arrangements for the development and trialling of the Levels 1 and 2 tasks and portfolio guidance. CCEA would produce tasks to enable the trials to be undertaken. The tasks would cover Literacy (at each of Levels 1 and 2), and Numeracy (at each of Levels 1 and 2). After these trials are completed, there would be a pilot of the qualification operated, with this leading to the full implementation of Essential Skills at Levels 1 and 2 from September 2004.

Timescales of the trial/pilot work

August/September 2003:	Task development
October/November 2003:	Trial of tasks and development of portfolio guidance
December/February 2004:	Preparation of information about qualification at Levels 1 and 2
March/August 2004:	Operational pilot of qualification (within this period accreditation of awarding bodies wishing to offer Essential Skills at Levels 1 and 2 will be completed).
September 2004:	Full operation of Essential Skills qualification at Levels 1 and 2

Essential Skills Qualification IT

The current Key Skills qualification portfolio includes IT. The Council will give further consideration as to whether there should be an Essential Skills qualification at Levels 1 and 2 in IT.

Use of ICT within Assessment

In the development of the assessment arrangements for Essential Skills, CCEA would wish to make the maximum use of ICT. This would cover both the management of the tasks and the portfolios. The Council is considering how to enable centres to download tasks and to have these tasks taken on-screen and marked by computer. This work will include the possibility of portfolio evidence being collected and held electronically in centres.

Future Work

The Council believes that the main vehicle for skills development in Northern Ireland should be the Essential Skills qualifications. This will require further consideration of:

- assessment/accreditation arrangements covering Levels 3 and 4; and
- assessment of the wider key skills of:
 - managing own learning and performance;
 - working with others; and
 - problem solving.

The Council will provide further advice on these areas in 2004.

June 2003