

GUIDANCE

Apprenticeship end-point assessments: guide for employers

Ofqual's approach to external quality assurance

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About this document

1. [The Institute for Apprenticeships](#) (the Institute) ‘empowers employers to help them create high quality apprenticeships.’
2. Each apprentice on a new Standards Apprenticeship is required to take an End-Point Assessment (EPA) to complete it. The EPA is delivered by an End-Point Assessment Organisation (EPAO), that is registered with the [Education and Skills Funding Agency](#) (ESFA).
3. The purpose of external quality assurance is to ensure that there is a fair, consistent and robust approach the endpoint assessment of an Apprenticeship Standard, regardless of which organisation is delivering the EPA and where and when it is carried out.
4. Ofqual is the statutory regulator of qualifications and is one of a number of organisations that provide external quality assurance of EPAs.
5. This guide details the way in which we approach the external quality assurance of EPAs. This guide will be useful for employers, training providers and EPAOs.
6. Annex A provides a summary for employers choosing their external quality assurance provider and Annex B provides additional information for EPAOs.

Ofqual and external quality assurance

7. Employers who are part of a Trailblazer group that is designing an Apprenticeship Standard choose the external quality assurance approach that they believe best suits their needs. We provide one of four options open to them; they can choose to have external quality assurance provided by Ofqual, through an employer-led model, by a professional body, or the [Institute](#).
8. Where Ofqual is selected to provide external quality assurance, we treat EPAs with the same seriousness and rigour as we do for other high stakes qualifications that we regulate. We aim to assure the quality of EPAs and secure public confidence in them, and both the EPAO and EPA are subject to our regulation.
9. We require all EPAOs wishing to deliver EPAs for which we are providing external quality assurance to be, or become, an Ofqual recognised Awarding Organisation (AO). Employers can therefore be confident that where Ofqual is involved, the organisation providing the EPA will be a regulated AO that has been through a formal process of recognition by us and is subject to our requirements. This means that we have tested their capacity and capability to undertake assessments consistently and reliably.

10. We provide external quality assurance using a range of legal powers available to us. This includes being able to set rules and enforce them; these are legally binding on the organisations that we regulate.
11. Specifically, we can require an AO to undertake or cease certain activities, intervene where there are issues with the quality of their assessments, or in extreme circumstances, we can fine the AO or withdraw their recognition. Withdrawing recognition would then prevent that organisation from undertaking or awarding EPAs against that Apprenticeship Standard.
12. Using all of our regulatory powers together means that we can act to prevent things going wrong or, if things have gone wrong, we can get back them back on track and protect the interests of apprentices.
13. When we provide external quality assurance, we combine our experience and expertise as specialists in assessment and educational standards with input from subject experts for each occupational area.
14. We focus on the validity of the EPA. This means that we expect the EPA to assess the requirements in the Apprenticeship Standard consistently and accurately, so that people can have confidence in results wherever and whenever the assessment is conducted.
15. We do not charge for providing external quality assurance and have no plans to do so.
16. Like all external quality assurance providers, we work closely with the Institute to ensure that our processes align and do not introduce confusion or unnecessary burden. We make them aware of any specific actions we are taking to assure quality, and provide them with an annual report, as a minimum.
17. If we do need to take regulatory action, we communicate it appropriately to support the prevention of similar incidents in the future. We share relevant information with the Institute so that it can inform their actions and to enable them to act in support of any regulatory action we are planning to take.

Seeking Ofqual as the external quality assurance provider

18. In the process of developing a new apprenticeship, Trailblazer groups are required to submit an Apprenticeship Standard and assessment plan for approval. Trailblazer groups must state who the external quality assurance provider will be within the assessment plan.
19. If a Trailblazer group want us to be involved, they will need to choose Ofqual as the external quality assurance provider during the development of the assessment plan. We recommend that Trailblazer groups get in touch with us directly early in the process; for example, when they have completed their initial thinking about the assessment plan, but while it is still in development.
20. On submission of an assessment plan to the Institute, the plan will be forwarded to us so we can consider it in parallel with the Institute's assessment team.
21. Working in this way enables us to provide Trailblazer groups with feedback and gives them the opportunity to revise and refine the plan during submission, with the benefit of our assessment expertise. They can therefore have greater assurance that the resulting assessment plan will support good quality EPAs that will test the right things in a reliable way.

After an Apprenticeship Standard is approved

22. There are some circumstances when a Trailblazer group may want to approach us to provide external quality assurance for an Apprenticeship Standard after the Institute has approved the assessment plan. This may be because they wish to change external quality assurance provider, or because originally there was no external quality assurance provider specified.
23. If this is the case, we will also work with them to refine and develop the assessment plan as part of a technical review process. If substantial changes are made, then it may have to be resubmitted to the Institute for approval.
24. We will not assume responsibility for the external quality assurance until the assessment plan has passed our technical review.

What this means for Trailblazer groups

25. Trailblazer groups can approach Ofqual to be the external quality assurance provider for their Apprenticeship Standard before or after the Institute approves that standard. We recommend they get in touch at an early stage if possible.

26. When submitting the assessment plan to the Institute, a Trailblazer group should indicate that they are choosing Ofqual as the external quality assurance provider.
27. When we receive the assessment plan from the Institute for us to review, we take this as a formal request from the Trailblazer group that they wish Ofqual to provide external quality assurance for the Apprenticeship Standard.
28. Any enquiries around our external quality assurance provision can be made by email to apprenticeships@ofqual.gov.uk.

How we undertake external quality assurance

29. There are six aspects to our external quality assurance:
 1. Technical review of the assessment plan.
 2. Ofqual recognition of EPAOs.
 3. Specific Conditions and guidance for EPAs.
 4. Technical evaluation of the EPA.
 5. Ongoing supervision of the EPA when it is in the market.
 6. Regulatory action if something goes wrong.
30. Through each of these aspects, we aim to provide evidence and examples of poor and good practice to inform improvements and learning across the apprenticeship system.

Technical review of the assessment plan

31. Our initial involvement is our offer of support in the development of the assessment plan. The assessment plan is the framework that AOs will use to develop the EPA.
32. A Technical Advisory Group of our assessment experts will review the draft assessment plan, focusing on making sure that that it will enable consistent and accurate measurement of the requirements specified in the Apprenticeship Standard, so that AOs will be able to use it to develop good quality EPAs.
33. It is crucial that the assessment plan is carefully specified in unambiguous terms, as there may be a range of different organisations interpreting it. We are happy to support Trailblazer groups in achieving this.
34. The central question that our Technical Advisory Group ask is: is there anything in the assessment plan that would cause an organisation to develop an EPA that is not sufficiently valid? The validity of an EPA is the extent to which it is possible to measure whatever that assessment needs to measure through implementation of its assessment plan.
35. We will not accept requests for external quality assurance unless our Technical Advisory Group has reviewed the assessment plan. We will, however, work with Trailblazer groups in an iterative way until our Technical Advisory Group is satisfied; and we will provide Trailblazer groups with specific feedback.

36. We have published our [findings from reviews of assessment plans](#) which Trailblazer groups may find useful to cross-reference.
37. Once our Technical Advisory Group and the Institute are assured that the assessment plan will facilitate the development of sufficiently valid EPAs, the Trailblazer group is notified that we have accepted its request for external quality assurance and the assessment plan is published by the Institute.
38. From time to time, AOs raise queries with us regarding assessment plans, or Trailblazer groups have queries regarding how AOs are interpreting the assessment plan.
39. In many cases a simple response is provided direct to the organisation or individual that has raised the query. In more complex cases, we may contact the Trailblazer group, to understand their intent, and/or communicate with the Institute to agree the clarification.
40. Where we believe that this information will be needed by others to ensure there is consistency and quality, we will release details of the clarification on our website.
41. We publish [details of EPAs where we have confirmed we are providing external quality assurance](#), and update this monthly on our website. We also publish the details of EPAs we are working towards accepting, and the stage they are at.

Ofqual recognition of End-Point Assessment Organisations

42. Once an assessment plan is formally approved by the Institute, organisations can come forward and apply for entry onto ESFA's [Register for End-Point Assessment Organisations](#) against that particular Apprenticeship Standard.¹
43. When Ofqual is confirmed as providing external quality assurance for an Apprenticeship Standard, the ESFA will ensure that only organisations (EPAOs) who are also recognised by Ofqual as AOs can be approved to develop EPAs against that Standard.
44. EPAOs can apply to be recognised by Ofqual at any time. Passing through the Ofqual recognition process means that an organisation's capacity and capability to deliver EPAs has been checked and that they are subject to our legally-binding requirements. Once they are recognised, we refer to them as AOs.

¹ The full list of approved Apprenticeship Standards is published by the Institute for Apprenticeships [on their website](#).

45. We have published [further information about our recognition process](#). We seek to actively support organisations who wish to become recognised by Ofqual.

Specific Conditions and guidance for End-Point Assessments

46. In summer 2018, following a consultation, we published [a tailored set of rules, relating specifically to our regulation of EPAs](#). Recognised AOs are required to meet our rules (both our [General Conditions of Recognition](#) and these tailored [EPA qualification-level Conditions and requirements](#)). We provide guidance to help AOs understand the rules.
47. Our rules cover the design, development and delivery of EPAs and set requirements relating to both the AO and the EPAs it offers. We monitor AOs to check that they meet our rules and require AOs to submit an annual statement of compliance.

Technical evaluation of End-Point Assessments

48. A crucial part of our external quality assurance is our technical evaluation of the EPAs themselves when AOs have developed them. This is an important check to see whether the assessment an AO is proposing to use meets the requirements that have been set out in the assessment plan.
49. We review EPAs that are on our Register of Regulated Qualifications² and available to learners. A technical evaluation may be undertaken at any point in the lifecycle of the EPA.
50. Our technical evaluation involves review by industry experts and also by assessment experts from Ofqual. During these reviews we consider if the EPA materials can:
- reliably test the knowledge, skills and behaviours specified in the Apprenticeship Standard and assessment plan
 - be graded in line with the assessment plan
 - enable results to be trusted as a measure of what an apprentice knows and can do
51. As part of this, therefore, we consider key aspects such as the extent to which the assessment materials:
- are at the correct level of demand in terms of assessment tasks and criteria
 - have clear task requirements, are manageable and can be authenticated
 - provide a basis for accurate and consistent assessor judgements

² <https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/>

- are appropriate and have comparable expectations
52. When we have reviewed an EPA, we provide feedback to the AO. We will indicate if we identify any potential risks to validity.
 53. Our expectation is that an EPA should be kept under regular review by the AO and that they will use this feedback as part of that process.
 54. We record our findings from the evaluation and will refer to these when monitoring the ongoing delivery of EPAs when they are in the market.

Ongoing External Quality Assurance

55. We engage with recognised AOs proactively to promote good practice and to prevent poor behaviours.
56. Where we provide external quality assurance, we do this for AOs delivering regulated EPAs, by:
 - inviting them to an EPA forum, where we discuss latest developments and findings and they can share their experiences and insights
 - providing guidance on many aspects of our rules
 - providing relevant information to equip them to comply with our rules and deliver EPAs which are in accordance with the assessment plan
57. We also have established methods for monitoring the delivery of qualifications and assessments that are live in the market. This includes careful monitoring of intelligence that we gather from stakeholders who have an interest in the qualification or assessment, including:
 - Apprenticeship training providers
 - the Institute, ESFA or other relevant government and partner organisations
 - employers
58. Each AO has an appeals and complaints process, which should be the first point of contact for anyone who has a concern about a regulated EPA.
59. We operate [a helpdesk](#) where anyone can report an issue, and through which matters that have not been able to be resolved through the AO can be escalated.
60. We also require AOs to report to us anything which, in their view, has gone wrong (or is likely to) which might have an adverse effect on learners or anything which means that they might not be compliant with our rules. We track these notifications and frequently look at themes and behaviours that might indicate that there are bigger issues.

61. Through all of this evidence and data, we form a well-rounded view of the AO and the EPA. We use this information to create risk analyses that inform our responsive actions and or our scheduled programme, and we have a number of regulatory tools which we can draw on.
62. Actions we may take include:
 - auditing identified AOs and their EPA delivery if we see a key risk emerging, for example, in a particular sector
 - undertaking additional technical evaluation of the relevant EPA
 - commissioning research on a specific theme
 - launching an investigation into a specific AO
63. Consideration of individual AOs and their activities provides ongoing assurance of AOs' capacity and capability to sustain effective and efficient delivery of EPAs, in line with our Conditions. This supports AOs in their commitment to continuous improvement of their practices and capabilities, providing further assurance across the system.
64. We can also take specific action focussed on the EPA. This would entail considering all relevant EPAs relating to a single assessment plan and enables us to establish a very granular picture of activity, in a cost and time efficient way.

Regulatory action if something goes wrong

65. If something is likely to or does go wrong, and there is sufficient evidence to prove it, we can act to enforce our rules. When we do this, our priority will be the protection of the apprentices involved, and to ensure that employers retain confidence in the EPAs.
66. We can:
 - impose additional rules on an AO to deal with specific issues
 - require AOs to do things or stop doing things, to bring them into compliance
 - impose financial penalties in proportionate circumstances, such as serious breaches that affect the standard of the EPA or public confidence
 - withdraw an AO's regulated status for some or all of its EPAs as necessary, preventing it from undertaking and awarding EPAs against an Apprenticeship Standard
67. We are accountable for making these decisions fairly and properly and our action must be proportionate.
68. If we take regulatory action, we will communicate it appropriately to support the prevention of similar incidents in the future.

A collaborative approach to providing external quality assurance

69. Trailblazer groups may feel that choosing an employer-led route or a professional body to provide the external quality assurance is right for a particular EPA or sector. We recognise that they may also want the EPAs taken by their apprentices to be Ofqual-regulated, and therefore subject to all the protection and quality assurance we can provide.
70. In these circumstances, we are happy to consider working in collaboration with another external quality assurance provider.
71. Our requirements for this arrangement are that any organisations involved will have to be recognised by us as regulated AOs. We will also need the assessment plan to have been reviewed and accepted by our Technical Advisory Group. To begin exploring working with us please contact apprenticeships@ofqual.gov.uk.

Annex A: Summary for employers

During the development of the assessment plan

Employers who are members of Trailblazer groups should:

- [contact us](#) as soon as possible if you would like us to provide external quality assurance - we are always happy to come and talk to you about our approach
- consider [our findings from our previous reviews of assessment plans](#)

We will:

- conduct a technical review of the assessment plan
- provide feedback and guidance, in conjunction with the Institute, to the Trailblazer group following our review
- notify the Trailblazer group, the Institute and the ESFA, to confirm we are able to provide external quality assurance

You can find details of all [assessment plans we have accepted and are considering](#) on our website.

Following confirmation that we will provide external quality assurance

We will:

- require all organisations that deliver EPAs for the approved plan to be recognised by us
- make available via [our Register](#), details of EPAs that we regulate
- remain in touch with the Trailblazer group, in order to seek their expertise and learn more about their experiences of EPAs

You can find details of:

- all EPAs where we have [confirmed we will provide external quality assurance](#) on our website
- our recognised AOs and regulated qualifications that are available to learners, including EPAs, on [our Register](#)

Once the EPAs are available to learners

We will:

- undertake a technical evaluation of the EPA materials on a sampled basis and provide feedback to the AO
- Regulate both the EPA and the AO developing and delivering it
- require the AO to confirm annually that they are compliant with our rules and report to us if they identify something is goes wrong (or is likely to) or means that they might not be compliant with our rules

- engage with AOs to promote good practice and to prevent poor behaviours, and monitor a range of evidence and data
- take regulatory action where we deem it to be necessary

Employers of apprentices should:

- find out if we are [providing external quality assurance](#) for the EPAs their apprentices are taking
- notify the AO if they have any concerns or complaints
- notify us if they have evidence that the AO is not responding to a complaint as they expect, so that we can look into this

Trailblazer groups may also want to:

- [Contact us](#) to consider provide external quality assurance once the assessment plan is live.
- [Contact us](#) to explore a collaborative approach to external quality assurance.

Annex B: Additional information for End-Point Assessment Organisations

If you are not recognised by us, but want to provide EPA for a standard where we have confirmed we are providing external quality assurance

You should:

- review the [lists of assessment plans](#) where we have confirmed we are the EQA provider and those we are considering
- consider our [General Conditions of Recognition](#), and our [specific Conditions and requirements](#) for EPA with which you will need to comply.
- review our [guidance on how to apply](#) to become a recognised AO.
- [contact us](#) to discuss applying for recognition, and we will advise you of what to do next

If you are a recognised AO, and want to provide EPA where we have confirmed we are providing external quality assurance

You should:

- consider our [specific Conditions and requirements](#) for EPAs, with which you will need to comply
- extend your scope of recognition, by [notifying us](#) of the details of the relevant EPA and explaining how these are similar to or differ from your current qualifications
- add details of your EPAs [to our register](#)

Once you are recognised and your EPAs are live on our register

We will:

- regulate you and the EPA, in line with our [General Conditions of Recognition](#), and our [specific Conditions and requirements](#)
- notify you if and when we want you to submit EPA materials for Technical evaluation - and once completed, provide you with direct feedback
- invite you to attend our EPA Forum
- inform you of our plans for ongoing EQA, making you aware in a timely fashion of any activity in which we would like you to participate

You should:

- [contact us](#) if you would like to apply to be recognised or wish to expand your scope of recognition
- [contact us](#) if you have any queries about an assessment plan
- notify us of any events that may affect an EPA, in line with our [guidance](#)
- monitor our regularly updated [lists of assessment plans](#) so you are aware of where we are providing EQA

Glossary

Apprenticeship Standard

The knowledge, skills, and behaviours agreed by employers that apprentices must meet. These are [listed on the Institute's website](#). 'Standard' may also mean the level of demand of an assessment or qualification.

Assessment Plan

Developed by a trailblazer group, this provides details of the EPA, which details the assessment methods to be used and the application of grading.

Awarding Organisation (AO)

Those organisations that are recognised by Ofqual, which develop and deliver regulated qualifications or EPAs where Ofqual provides EQA. Any organisation that wishes to develop and deliver EPAs where Ofqual provides EQA must [apply for recognition](#).

Comparability

Generating assessment outcomes that are comparable between AOs and over time. There are two reasons for this:

- to reach fair comparisons about the attainment of learners, e.g. where apprentices are working against the same Apprenticeship Standard but with different AOs
- to ensure that the outcomes can be used as a measure of standards

End-Point Assessment (EPA)

A synoptic assessment of the knowledge, skills, and behaviours that have been learnt throughout the apprenticeship. The purpose of the assessment is to make sure the apprentice meets the standard set by employers and are fully competent in the occupation. It is taken by apprentices at the very end of the on-programme phase of training when their employer (and in some cases their training provider) is satisfied that they have met the 'gateway' criteria to undertake the assessment. End-point assessments are graded, and successful completion leads to the awarding of an apprenticeship certificate.³

³ <http://futureapprenticeships.org.uk/end-point-assessment/>

End-Point Assessment Organisations (EPAO)

Approved organisations listed on the ESFA's [Register of Apprenticeship End-Point Assessment Organisations](#) that develop and deliver EPAs.⁴ Not all EPAOs are recognised by Ofqual.

ESFA

[The Education and Skills Funding Agency](#).

The government agency accountable for funding education and skills for children, young people and adults.

External Quality Assurance (EQA)

A requirement of all Apprenticeship Standards provided by one of four routes.

General Conditions of Recognition (the Conditions)

[The rules](#), to which an AO's recognition is subject, including our [General Conditions of Recognition](#), and our [specific Conditions and requirements](#)

Institute

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

Recognition

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

Trailblazer group

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

Validity

This is the extent to which evidence and theory support the interpretation that the assessment outcomes meet their intended uses.

⁴ These organisations have previously been referred to as Apprenticeship Assessment Organisations (AAOs) and were listed on the - then known as - Register of Approved Assessment Organisations (RoAAO).



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