

NCFE

Background

NCFE is one of the UK's fastest growing national awarding bodies, designing and awarding qualifications that are nationally recognised to meet the needs of learners and employers. NCFE provides a wide range of national qualifications at different levels and in a variety of subject areas including NVQs, Key skills, Basic skills, Functional skills and Entry level qualifications. Their history of vocational awards spans 150 years from the founding organisation Northern Union of Mechanics' Institute (NUMI) established in 1848, to the present day awarding organisation NCFE.

NCFE and e-assessment

NCFE is committed to developing e-assessment across its qualification offer. Currently it operates an online software system called *online assessment* which allows its centres to deliver multiple choice question papers securely online. Currently this is available for Key Skills and Basic Skills at level 1 and 2 and three other awards:

NCFE level 2 Certificate in Safer Moving and Handling (including people)

NCFE level 2 Certificate in Developing Skills for Early Years Practice

NCFE level 1 Award in Providing a Healthier School Meals Service

The main driver for NCFE is to be able to assess in the most practical way possible – eg an assessment of a candidate's IT skills is best tested using an online system. NCFE feels that IT is used more and more as part of daily life that it's now a 'natural' way to assess candidates. It also means that in most cases candidates can get immediate results, and in those cases where they require an examiner to mark them the system can be used to standardise and check marks and results before issuing them to centres.

From a centre's perspective the main driver is fit for purpose assessments, less resources, quicker turnaround times and reduced cost.

Introducing e-assessment

The priority for NCFE in introducing e-assessment is to ensure that life becomes "easier" for its centres both in terms of efficiency of operations and cost savings in terms of time and money. The ability to improve services for centres is a key factor and the online assessment tool allows centres to schedule and manage candidate assessments independently and remotely in a secure environment.

Key focus for e-assessment

Perhaps the most important focus on e-assessment to date has been to ensure that there is effective communication and guidance for the centres implementing e-assessment. NCFE has published a number of online resources in the form of guidance manuals and online tutorials to support centres. The online assessment software is also available to be downloaded as well as customer help and technical assistance via the telephone.

One of the key challenges in introducing e-assessment is the requirement to combine assessment and ICT expertise so that the system delivers exactly what is required. Questions and tasks that make up external assessment need to be considered in light of the online capability – ie what looks good on paper doesn't always work so well on screen. When making external assessments available online there needs to be additional checking processes in place to ensure that text and images are readable and that the system flows smoothly – again what works well on paper may not translate well on screen. Back-up arrangements and data security need to be given consideration – all of which are vastly different to procedures in place for paper-based assessments.

Accessibility is probably the main other key focus. NCFE must ensure that centres have the systems and procedures in place to support the use of online assessment and to be able to

support them when they have candidates that may not be able to access the system. Amendments have been made to the system to accommodate some of these accessibility requirements, but there is still significant work to be done in general to address the issues around accessibility. The online testing currently allows for reasonable time adjustments to be made for candidates who may have particular needs in terms of accessibility.

Are there constraints on e-assessment?

The online assessment system used by NCFE centres is supported by quality guidance manuals and tutorials which are updated accordingly as software is upgraded. The system intends to give more flexibility in assessments and ease the management of the assessment process. The online testing allows for reasonable adjustment times in case of emergencies or short breaks in service to ensure that candidates are not placed at a disadvantage. In the event of a complete system failure at a centre NCFE has procedures in place to minimise the disruption to candidates. If candidates have partially completed their assessment, the system records that information and if they've completed a significant amount of the assessment award can be made on that basis. If candidates haven't started their assessment or haven't completed a significant part of it then they can either re-schedule the assessment for a later time or day, or alternatively complete a paper based test however these need to be despatched to the centre and would take a minimum of 24 hours to arrive.

At each stage the centre is responsible for security ensuring the authenticity of the candidates and the assessment and having the appropriate levels of invigilation and also technical assistance as required.

The use of multiple choice questions may present some constraints especially with on-demand testing and ensuring that item banks are sufficient to deal with this without creating unfair advantages. NCFE operates a test allocation system that automatically allocates to individual candidates a test that they have not sat before. There are at least 6 test papers in the 'bank' for each qualification at each level, to ensure that candidates won't get to sit the same paper twice. NCFE also recommends to centres that candidates should wait a minimum of 5 days between re-sitting assessments and monitors the number of re-sits a candidate takes and contacts centres if this exceeds 3 times. This is to maintain the integrity of the process and to offer guidance around the assessment. As candidates are given a different test paper online at each sitting there is no risk of them simply recognising and selecting the correct answers.

Although NCFE are not currently considering using an e-portfolio system they are happy to accept candidate evidence that is stored on e-portfolio systems. This is not significantly different to paper-based and the emphasis is placed on the centre to demonstrate integrity of evidence and authenticity as part of the ongoing monitoring and quality assurance processes. NCFE are currently developing their online system to accommodate task based forms of assessment that require short answer style questions, simulations and are based on using interactive articles and images. This is a significant challenge and they are just starting to uncover the hidden issues of this!