



## **Essential Skills Comparability Study 2012**

Review of Action-Based Activity Templates and Assessed Portfolios  
for Communication and Application of Number at Levels 1 and 2

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## Introduction

The Essential Skills (ES) qualifications in Communication and Application of Number at Levels 1 and 2 are included in most Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) funded Apprenticeship and training programmes, as appropriate. ES qualifications are also now offered in approximately 70 schools in Northern Ireland.

CCEA Accreditation is the regulator for ES qualifications in Northern Ireland and as part of this remit seeks to ensure that the standards of examinations and assessments conducted by bodies or authorities in Northern Ireland are appropriate. These Essential Skills qualifications are only available in Northern Ireland, and there are three awarding organisations (AOs):

- City & Guilds;
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA); and
- National Open College Network (NOCN).

This study took place in October 2012 and involved a sample of Action-Based Activity (ABA) templates and assessed portfolios. The results are available in the Accreditation area of the CCEA website at [www.ccea.org.uk](http://www.ccea.org.uk). They will also form part of the 2013 ES Monitoring Activity Reports on each of the three AOs.

## Aim

This study aims to compare the *opportunity* for achievement and *actual* achievement of candidates taking ES Communication and Application of Number qualifications at Levels 1 and 2.

## Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- to determine if a sample of ABA templates give learners the opportunity to meet the assessment criteria for ES Communication and Application of Number at Levels 1 and 2;
- to determine if a sample of assessed ABA portfolios from ES Communication and Application of Number at Levels 1 and 2 meet the assessment criteria *within* each AO (City & Guilds, CCEA and NOCN); and
- to judge if a sample of assessed ABA portfolios from ES Communication and Application of Number at Levels 1 and 2 meet the assessment criteria *across all three* AOs (City & Guilds, CCEA and NOCN).

## Scope

The awarding organisations in scope for this study are all three of those that offer ES qualifications in Communication and Application of Number at Levels 1 and 2: City & Guilds, CCEA and NOCN.

## **Executive Summary**

The aim of this study was to compare opportunity for achievement and actual achievement of learners taking Essential Skills Communication and Application of Number qualifications at Levels 1 and 2, both within each awarding organisation and across all three awarding organisations that offer the qualifications: City & Guilds, CCEA and NOCN.

The study took place in October 2012 and involved assessed Action-Based Activity (ABA) portfolios and ABA templates offered by each awarding organisation.

## **Findings**

Below is a summary of findings from the study:

1. The ABA templates offered by each AO in Communication at Level 1 and Level 2 and in Application of Number at Level 1 allow the learner to generate the evidence needed, demonstrate competence and meet the appropriate assessment criteria.
2. The current ABA templates for Application of Number at Level 2 offered by each AO do not give learners all the information they need to generate the required evidence, demonstrate competence and meet the appropriate assessment criteria.
3. Of the total number of assessed ABA portfolios that were examined, the following met the required assessment criteria:
  - 17 of 19 Communication portfolios assessed at Level 1;
  - 22 of 24 Communication portfolios assessed at Level 2;
  - 10 of 14 Application of Number portfolios assessed at Level 1; and
  - 27 of 30 Application of Number portfolios assessed at Level 2.
4. Each of the three AOs had a small number of assessed ABA portfolios that did not meet the required assessment criteria. However, a high percentage of portfolios across all AOs did meet the assessment criteria, and this gives confidence that standards are being applied consistently.
5. In the main, the sample of assessed ABA portfolios from Essential Skills Communication and Application of Number at Levels 1 and 2 showed that the assessment criteria were applied consistently across the three awarding organisations, as learners' attainments met the assessment criteria for the appropriate level (Level 1 or Level 2).

## **Actions for Awarding Organisations**

As a result of the findings from this study, there are a number of actions to be addressed by all awarding organisations. These require the awarding organisations to:

1. review the ABA templates for Communication and Application of Number to ensure they provide consistent advice and guidance in both the Vocational and General Themed templates;
2. revise the Application of Number Level 2 templates to make clear that learners need one continuous activity to provide evidence that meets assessment criteria N2.1, N2.2 and N2.3;
3. make examples of stimulus materials in the ABA templates more relevant, and have them reflect a broader range of sources;
4. review the language used and the readability of the ABA templates;
5. clarify the content and references that portfolios need to include; and
6. give guidance to assessors on the requirements for marking and annotation of portfolios.

In addition, there are detailed actions listed in the ABA template and assessed portfolio sections of this report.

For the small number of portfolios that did not meet the required assessment criteria, the required actions are specific to each awarding organisation. These will be communicated in individual reports to each AO.

## Background

1. The Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DEL) introduced an Essential Skills Strategy in 2003. As a result, a new suite of qualifications – Essential Skills – was developed. This suite offers qualifications from Entry Level to Level 2 in Literacy/Communication and Numeracy/Application of Number. Since 2009, Essential Skills Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has also been available, at Levels 1 and 2.
2. The ES qualifications are designed to recognise learners' progression in terms of both underpinning knowledge and the application of skills. Each level incorporates and builds on the previous levels.
3. From 2004, ES qualifications replaced Key Skills provision within full-time further education programmes in colleges. All DEL funded apprenticeship and training programmes include ES qualifications where appropriate. Around 70 schools in Northern Ireland also now offer ES qualifications.
4. CCEA Accreditation is the regulator for all ES qualifications taken in Northern Ireland.
5. The suite of ES qualifications comprises:
  - Literacy at Entry Level;
  - Communication at Levels 1 and 2;
  - Numeracy at Entry Level;
  - Application of Number at Levels 1 and 2; and
  - ICT at Levels 1 and 2.
6. ES Communication has three components:
  - speaking and listening;
  - reading; and
  - writing.
7. ES Application of Number has three components:
  - understand and use mathematical information;
  - calculate and manipulate mathematical information; and
  - interpret results and communicate mathematical information.
8. These ES qualifications are only available in Northern Ireland, and there are three awarding organisations: City & Guilds, CCEA and NOCN.

9. The current assessment model for Essential Skills Communication and Application of Number at Levels 1 and 2 requires learners to complete:
  - a portfolio based on an Action-Based Activity (ABA); and
  - a supervised Desktop Task (DTT).
10. The AOs have devised templates for the ABA in General and Vocationally Themed areas. All three awarding organisations offer common DTTs.
11. Learners must pass both parts of the assessment to achieve the appropriate qualification.
12. The evidence that learners produce in the ABA must meet the standard at either Level 1 or Level 2. They also need to obtain a pass mark of at least 70% in a Level 1 or Level 2 DTT. Learners who take a Level 2 DTT and achieve at least 50% but less than 70% will be awarded a Level 1 qualification.

## Methodology

13. This study focused on ABA templates and assessed ABA portfolios only. CCEA Accreditation employed subject experts in Communication and Application of Number to review how suitable the ABAs were. Their remit was:
  - to judge whether the ABA templates that awarding organisations have devised allow learners to meet the assessment criteria of the ES qualification at the relevant level; and
  - to review assessed ABA portfolios for Communication and Application of Number at Levels 1 and 2.
14. CCEA Accreditation selected the assessed ABA portfolios from a list provided by each awarding organisation.
15. The subject experts reviewed a total of 86 assessed ABA portfolios. This included 43 Communication portfolios (19 at Level 1 and 24 at Level 2) and 44 Application of Number portfolios (14 at Level 1 and 30 at Level 2).
16. Please note that some of the assessed ABA portfolios in the sample had not been internally or externally moderated.

# Communication: ABA Templates

## Background

17. Action-Based Activities (ABAs) are projects or assignments designed by the awarding organisation to allow learners to meet the Communication assessment criteria at Levels 1 and 2. Learners complete the activities during their programme of study. ABAs are assessed on the basis of the evidence in the learner's portfolio: they are internally assessed by the tutor, internally standardised in the centre, and externally moderated.
18. There are currently two types of ABA template – General Themed and Vocationally Themed:
  - The General Themed templates were developed first and designed to be relevant to the adult population for whom the Essential Skills qualification was originally created.
  - The Vocationally Themed templates were developed later, as the qualification was rolled out to younger students, most of whom were studying vocational qualifications.

## Findings

19. The subject experts examined 10 ABA Communication templates: six General Themed and four Vocationally Themed. In each case, the templates gave learners the opportunity to generate the evidence needed, demonstrate competence and meet the assessment criteria at Level 1 and Level 2.
20. The ABA templates are published in colour. The language used is clear, appropriate, and of a standard that the intended audience should understand. The examples of stimulus materials given are mainly appropriate to the tasks. However, some ABA templates cite materials that are no longer current and would be difficult to find. This would be confusing for learners.
21. ABA templates contain many features such as headings, tables, symbols (ticks, exclamation marks, arrows and circles) and boxes for steps and tasks. However, these tools can actually become a barrier to understanding by making the templates look fussy and crowded. Colour can be an aid to understanding, but as many learners use black and white copies of the templates, they may not benefit from this.

22. The ABA templates indicate the additional criteria needed to achieve Level 2. However, the tutor needs to refer to these together with the Tutor Guide to understand the specific requirements of each level; the Guidance notes after the Standards and Evidence Requirements for each task leave the tutor in no doubt about the requirements for a portfolio. Tutors also need to be familiar with the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum; this describes in detail the skills and knowledge that learners need in order to achieve each level.
23. In general, the ABA templates allow learners to generate evidence that they have met the assessment criteria at the appropriate level. However, some of the tasks suggested in 'More action based activity ideas' on the final page of each ABA template would not meet the assessment criteria. The Vocationally Themed ABA templates give a lot more direction and guidance than the General Themed ones.
24. It is unlikely that learners would be able to use the ABA templates independently to build a portfolio. Most learners, particularly those at Level 1 who are new to the experience of compiling a portfolio, would need a lot of support and direction from the tutor, as it is difficult to distinguish in the templates between what is advised, what is an example and what is necessary.

## Required Actions

25. Provide specific guidance to clarify language and terminology, such as:
- **'read relevant documents'** – what exactly does 'relevant' mean?
  - **'shorter written document'** – what exactly does 'shorter' mean?
  - **'use of image'** – how are images to be used?
26. Revise the ABA templates to ensure that both the Vocational and the General Themed ABAs give consistent advice and guidance. As part of this revision, update the examples and suggested reading material in the templates and improve their readability.

# Communication: Assessed ABA Portfolios

## Background

27. Subject experts reviewed a total of 43 Communication portfolios: 19 at Level 1 and 24 at Level 2.
28. Each Level 1 portfolio should contain evidence for these assessment criteria:
  - C1.1 *Take part in either a one-to-one discussion or a group discussion.*
  - C1.2 *Read and obtain information from at least one document.*
  - C1.3 *Write two different types of document.*
29. Each Level 2 portfolio should contain evidence for these assessment criteria:
  - C2.1a *Take part in a group discussion.*
  - C2.1b *Give a talk of at least four minutes.*
  - C2.2 *Read and summarise information from at least two documents about the same subject. Each document must be a minimum of 500 words long.*
  - C2.3 *Write two different types of document, each one giving different information. One document must be at least 500 words long.*

## Findings

### Level 1

30. Seventeen of the 19 portfolios at Level 1 met the assessment criteria.
31. C1.1 *Take part in either a one-to-one discussion or a group discussion.*  
Most portfolios provided clear evidence, through tutor annotation and supporting documentation, of how learners had met the assessment criteria. However, in three portfolios there was no information from tutors on learners' performance and how they had met the standard.
32. C1.2 *Read and obtain information from at least one document.*  
Generally this task was completed satisfactorily, with source documents of an appropriate length and content. Learners had extracted information from the source documents and used it to inform one or more of their written documents. However:
  - in two portfolios, information was selected but not then used for any purpose;

- one portfolio had a source document that was too complex for Level 1 – the learner had copied information from this but not used it in the written or oral task; and
- three other portfolios did not include the source document, just the website address.

There was also one issue of authenticity, where a learner highlighted some points on the document and someone else summarised these points (using very different handwriting and a level of language beyond that shown by the learner) in the margin. In ‘information obtained’, the learner copied these points word for word, and the tutor noted ‘candidate has identified the main points of the reading document and used information to suit the purpose’. This should have been picked up during the internal moderation process.

33. *C1.3 Write two different types of document.*

These documents were mostly well written, fit for purpose and informed by details extracted from the source document. This showed that the learners had read and understood the source document for a particular purpose.

However:

- two portfolios did not use information from the source documents;
- in one portfolio the written documents were too short for Level 1 – each was just three sentences long (74 and 58 words respectively); and
- one written document had an incorrect paragraph structure, consisting of a list of simple sentences rather than continuous prose.

*Level 2*

34. Twenty-two of the 24 portfolios at Level 2 met the assessment criteria.

35. *C2.1a Take part in a group discussion.*

Only 10 of the 24 portfolios were supported by tutor records with details of the learner’s participation in a group discussion and how they met the standard. Other supporting evidence of learners’ work included notes, background reading and ideas for the contributions they intended to make. Fourteen portfolios had supporting material from learners but no tutor commentary on their performance.

36. *C2.1b Give a talk of at least four minutes.*

Only 14 of the 24 portfolios were supported by tutor records with details on how the learner had met the standard. Other supporting evidence of learners’ work included notes, presentations and self-evaluation. Again, the

remaining 10 portfolios lacked tutor records on how learners had met the assessment criteria.

37. *C2.2 Read and summarise information from at least two documents about the same subject. Each document must be a minimum of 500 words long.*

Most portfolios provided evidence that learners had read relevant documents, identified the main points and used them to inform one or both of their written documents. However, in one portfolio it was impossible to know what was part of the source documents and what was the learner's work. Another portfolio used a complete safety handbook, which was already summarised and in numbered points; the learner had then copied the first sentence of each point word for word.

38. *C2.3 Write two different types of document, each one giving different information. One document must be at least 500 words long.*

Most portfolios provided evidence that learners had met the standard. The documents were well structured and used correct format and language, and the tone and style were generally appropriate to the audience and task. However:

- two portfolios had errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG), and one of the tutors had not highlighted these;
- one portfolio included a poster that had insufficient text to generate evidence for Level 2; and
- one portfolio included only one document written by the learner.

### *General*

39. Use of Image: The use of images was problematic in a number of portfolios; learners had inserted the images with no indication how or to what effect they were being used. Images need to convey information to the audience or clarify points being made.
40. Marking and Annotation: There was an inconsistent approach to marking and annotation in the portfolios sampled. In some cases, the annotation was personalised, giving encouragement to the learner and indicating where they had met the assessment criteria. In others, it consisted mainly of reference numbers and the 'evidence requirements' copied word for word. Some had no ticks, comments or notes from tutors to indicate whether the learner had met the assessment criteria and, if they had, what aspects of the task allowed the tutor to make that judgement. Some portfolios also included unnecessary materials, and it was unclear which

materials were used for teaching and learning and which were assessment evidence.

## **Required Actions**

### *Level 1*

41. Include evidence in all portfolios that shows how learners have met the assessment criteria for taking part in either a one-to-one or a group discussion.
42. Clarify the appropriate use, length and relevance of source documents.
43. Emphasise the importance of the internal moderator's role in the quality assurance process of the ABA.

### *Level 2*

44. Include evidence of learners' performance in all portfolios that shows how they have met the assessment criteria for taking part in a group discussion and giving a talk of at least 4 minutes.
45. Clarify the requirements for portfolio building, including details on the content and references that learners need to include.
46. Clarify how to mark portfolios, particularly in the area of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

### *General*

47. Give clarification on the appropriate use of images: to convey information to the audience or to clarify points being made.
48. Give clarification to assessors on a consistent approach to marking and annotation.

# Application of Number: ABA Templates

## Background

49. Action-Based Activities (ABAs) are projects or assignments designed by the awarding organisation to allow learners to meet the Application of Number assessment criteria at Levels 1 and 2. Learners complete the activities during their programme of study. ABAs are assessed on the basis of the evidence in the learner's portfolio: they are internally assessed by the tutor, internally standardised in the centre, and externally moderated.
50. There are currently two types of ABA template – General Themed and Vocationally Themed:
- The General Themed templates were developed first and designed to be relevant to the adult population for whom the Essential Skills qualification was originally created.
  - The Vocationally Themed templates were developed later, as the qualification was rolled out to younger students, most of whom were studying vocational qualifications.

## Findings

51. The subject experts examined 10 ABA Application of Number templates: five General Themed and five Vocationally Themed. In each case, the templates gave learners the opportunity to generate the evidence needed, demonstrate competence and meet the assessment criteria at Level 1.
52. None of the ABA templates at Level 2 indicate that in order to meet the assessment criteria learners need to have at least one continuous activity that provides evidence for N2.1, N2.2 and N2.3.
53. The ABA templates are published in colour. The language used is clear, appropriate, and of a standard that the intended audience should understand.
54. The layout of the ABA templates is not particularly clear. They contain a lot of writing which makes them look fussy and overcrowded.
55. Some of the main components of the assessment criteria, such as describing results, appear in a checklist or beside an exclamation mark but are not mentioned in the body of the text.

56. The ABA templates do not define the terms chart, graph and diagram or specify the requirements for these (for example that learners cannot use a chart or graph that they have created themselves).
57. The ABA templates as written allow each learner to provide evidence that can be authenticated.
58. Assessors are able to:
  - understand the assessment as described in the templates;
  - apply the assessment criteria accurately and consistently; and
  - differentiate between Level 1 and Level 2.
59. It is clear what *types* of assessment evidence are acceptable; these are set out in a table format. However, it is not clear what *quantity* of evidence is acceptable. In the General Themed ABA templates, the number '3' beside each type of calculation implies that learners should produce three examples of each. In the Vocationally Themed ABA templates, there are ticks – not numbers – beside each type of calculation.

## **Required Actions**

60. Include clear instructions in all ABA templates stating that learners need to have one continuous activity to provide evidence to meet assessment criteria N2.1, N2.2 *and* N2.3.
61. Make some of the examples of stimulus materials given more relevant for learners, and ensure that they reflect a broader range of the types of sources that learners could use.
62. Review the level, layout and amount of language used, to avoid disadvantaging learners with poor reading skills.
63. Give clear definitions of a chart, graph and diagram, and make clear which sources are unacceptable.
64. Set clear rules on the number and types of calculations that are acceptable, and present these in a clear and consistent format for both General and Vocationally Themed ABA templates.

# Application of Number: Assessed ABA Portfolios

## Background

65. Subject experts reviewed a total of 44 Application of Number portfolios: 14 at Level 1 and 30 at Level 2.

66. Each Level 1 portfolio should contain evidence for these assessment criteria:

*N1.1 Interpret information from two different sources. At least one source must include a table, chart, graph or diagram.*

*N1.2 Carry out and check calculations to do with:*  
*a. amounts or sizes*  
*b. scales or proportion*  
*c. handling statistics.*

*N1.3 Interpret the results of your calculations and present your findings – in two different ways using charts or diagrams.*

67. Each Level 2 portfolio should contain evidence for these assessment criteria:

*N2.1 Interpret information from a suitable source.*

*N2.2 Use your information to carry out calculations to do with:*  
*a. amounts or sizes*  
*b. scales or proportion*  
*c. handling statistics*  
*d. using formulae.*

*N2.3 Interpret the results of your calculations and present your findings.*

*Carry out at least one activity that includes tasks for all three of N2.1, N2.2 (a or b or c or d) and N2.3.*

*Overall, through one or more activities you must:*

- use two different sources which include material containing a chart or graph (N2.1);*
- do calculations for a, b, c and d (N2.2); and*
- present findings in two different ways using charts, graphs or diagrams (N2.3).*

## Findings

### Level 1

68. N1.1 *Interpret information from two different sources. At least one source must include a table, chart, graph or diagram.*

One portfolio used a graph that a learner had created. This does not meet the assessment criteria. Three of the portfolios that had used suitable external sources did not reference these sources. All the portfolios had sufficient written explanations of suitable calculations that the learners would use.

69. N1.2 *Carry out and check calculations to do with*  
*a. amounts or sizes*  
*b. scales or proportion*  
*c. handling statistics.*

All portfolios demonstrated this standard well except one, which did not show any evidence of calculation checks. In most portfolios the learner had used inverse calculations to check results. In some, they had used a calculator.

70. N1.3 *Interpret the results of your calculations and present your findings – in two different ways using charts or diagrams.*

All portfolios included evidence of the interpretation of results. This standard was demonstrated particularly well. Learners presented their findings in a number of ways, for example charts, tables and tally charts.

However:

- in one portfolio the learner used a graph to present findings, which is not acceptable at Level 1;
- one portfolio did not contain any description of results; and
- one portfolio described results for the pie chart but had no description of the pie chart.

### Level 2

71. N2.1 *Interpret information from a suitable source.*

In the majority of portfolios reviewed, learners had included an introduction describing how they intended to get the information. However, 11 portfolios did not have this introduction – only a list of sources used. Most sources selected were acceptable, but one portfolio did not include a chart or graph as a source, and another portfolio had used a map as a distance chart. This does not meet the assessment criteria. All portfolios included a written explanation of the method learners would use for their calculations.

72. N2.2 *Use your information to carry out calculations to do with:*
- a. *amounts or sizes*
  - b. *scales or proportion*
  - c. *handling statistics*
  - d. *using formulae.*

All portfolios showed methods and appropriate levels of accuracy for the calculations carried out. In most portfolios, this standard was well demonstrated. In most portfolios the learner had used inverse calculations and estimations to check results. Eleven portfolios indicated that the learner had used a calculator to check results, which is not an acceptable method of checking.

73. N2.3 *Interpret the results of your calculations and present your findings.*
- All portfolios contained evidence of selecting appropriate ways to present learners' findings.

## **Required Actions**

### *Level 1*

74. Clarify what type of sources are valid, for example that it is not acceptable to use the learner's own work as a source document.
75. Include clear, accurate references for all sources of information used.
76. Include evidence of calculation checks in all portfolios.
77. Clarify what is acceptable as a calculation check, for example that using a calculator is not suitable.
78. Ensure that all learners describe the results in their charts and/or diagrams.
79. Clarify suitable ways to present findings, highlighting that a graph is not acceptable at Level 1.

### *Level 2*

80. Ensure that all portfolios describe how the learners are going to obtain results.
81. Include clear, accurate references for all sources of information used.
82. Include evidence of calculation checks in all portfolios.
83. Clarify what is acceptable as a calculation check, for example that using a calculator is not suitable.

## Conclusions

84. The ABA templates for Communication at Levels 1 and 2 and the Application of Number at Level 1 allow the learner to generate the evidence needed, demonstrate competence and meet the appropriate assessment criteria.
85. The current templates for Application of Number at Level 2 do not provide this opportunity. These need to be revised to make clear that learners need one continuous activity to provide evidence that meets assessment criteria N2.1, N2.2 and N2.3.
86. Of the assessed ABA portfolios in the sample, the following met the required assessment criteria:
- 17 of 19 Communication portfolios assessed at Level 1;
  - 22 of 24 Communication portfolios assessed at Level 2;
  - 10 of 14 Application of Number portfolios assessed at Level 1; and
  - 27 of 30 Application of Number portfolios assessed at Level 2.
87. Each of the awarding organisations examined had a small number of assessed ABA portfolios that did not meet the required assessment criteria. However, a high percentage of portfolios did meet the assessment criteria across all awarding organisations. This gives confidence that standards are being applied consistently.
88. For the small number of portfolios that did not meet the required assessment criteria, the required actions will appear in the monitoring report specific to each awarding organisation.

## **Actions for Awarding Organisations**

89. Review the ABA templates for Communication and Application of Number to ensure they provide consistent advice and guidance in both the Vocational and General Themed templates.
90. Revise the Application of Number Level 2 templates to make clear that learners need one continuous activity to provide evidence that meets assessment criteria N2.1, N2.2 and N2.3.
91. Make examples of stimulus materials in the ABA templates more relevant, and have them reflect a broader range of sources.
92. Review the language used and the readability of the ABA templates.
93. Clarify the content and references that portfolios need to include.
94. Give guidance to assessors on the requirements for marking and annotation of portfolios.