



23<sup>rd</sup> September 2025

Theme: Preparing for the future of apprenticeship assessment

Paul Johnstone - Senior Associate at SDN Mesma Group, Specialist in education and skills policy  
Paul delivered the closing session at the conference and summarised the key points made.  
Here are his notes from the day.



## Evaluation and Change

- Eight years into the reformed apprenticeships: crucial to evaluate successes and challenges
- Informed perspectives and live delivery evidence enable us to address any areas of weakness and secure meaningful and measurable improvements.
- All voices must be heard, particularly apprentices and employers of all sizes.
- It is important that we evaluate programme and assessment performance using several years of evidence from live delivery.

**Aim: Address issues, secure quality, expand reach, grow volumes, and keep improving.**

## Policy and regulatory responsiveness

(fully informed by the sector)

Effective policy and regulation are a two-way process. Government, Skills England, and Ofqual have been listening carefully to the sector, and using emerging evidence and diverse perspectives to develop these updates.

**While helpful flexibilities are being introduced, essential features of the current model will be retained: externality; objectivity; independence; quality, consistency, and reliability; and end-of-programme standards confirmation**



*The conference was packed with expert speakers and a huge audience committed to quality change and continuous improvement, led by the most inspiring of Skills Champions, Louise Doyle.*



## Poll: Confidence and readiness for changes

**Start-of-day poll:** 75%+ reported only some or limited confidence

**End-of-day poll:** A clear majority reported reasonable or high confidence

**Stakeholders see the value, opportunities and support available. They also recognise that greater flexibility brings greater responsibility. Careful planning, preparation, and effective partnerships will be essential.**

## Sustained focus on system-wide quality change, not further policy change

### Speakers emphasised:

- Real gains in national apprenticeships from reformed model with improved profile, recognition, reputation, quality, and consistency
- The need for evidence-based, planned, and incremental quality improvement, not confusion of ongoing policy change
- Integrating on-programme development and delivery with authentic performance measurement and effective feedback (formative, on-programme, and summative assessment)
- Need for reduced complexity and duplication with easier access points, efficiency, and manageability for all parties

## Change and Churn

- Must balance raising standards and continuous improvement with clarity, consistency, and stability
- Too much change and churn risks confusion and disengagement, and reduced investment and returns.



[linkedin.com/company/sdn-mesma-group](https://www.linkedin.com/company/sdn-mesma-group)

[www.strategicdevelopmentnetwork.co.uk/assessment-reform](https://www.strategicdevelopmentnetwork.co.uk/assessment-reform)



Sak Awan, Lou Doyle and Lindsay

## Session 1 - Question 1: How confident are you that your organisation can respond in a timely way to the apprenticeship assessment reform?

1 4 6

Very confident

16 %

Somewhat confident

52 %

Room for improvement

23 %

Not confident

10 %

Unsure



## Purpose and Aim of assessment updates



Assessments should be valid, accurate, efficient, and reflective of occupational demands.

- An expanded evidence base: richer, more reliable, accurate, and fair evidence of competence
- Reduced pressure and anxiety of a single, end-point assessment: staged, developmental assessment, with more than one opportunity to demonstrate competence
- Improved retention, readiness, results, confidence, and competence
- More authentic, relevant, and accessible assessment methods available: with real-life work-based opportunities to demonstrate capabilities (inc. teamwork, decision-making, problem-solving, behaviours)

Assessments need to be valid, accurate, proportionate, and reflective of occupational demands with:

- Integrated, authentic on-programme assessment; not duplication, but corroboration of progress and performance
- External assessment not an artificial add-on or unhelpful barrier but an industry-endorsed, independent confirmation of capabilities and competence

## Looking Ahead



The changes present significant opportunities to improve quality and standards, access and opportunity, engagement, investment, and returns. This will require:

- renewed emphasis on developing confidence and competence at each stage (for apprentices, providers, AOs and employers)
- recognition of the challenges ahead with adequate training, professional development, expert support, and preparation time
- more effective collaboration; less transactional, more transformational development partnerships from the start
- an understanding that "there's no end to continuous improvement"

## Conference Key Themes

**Shared objectives:** government, regulators, employers, providers, and apprentices are shaping policy change and quality improvement practices together

**Evaluation and evidence:** honest review of apprenticeship and assessment performance evidence to identify solutions and secure improvements

**Quality training and performance measurement:** incremental, evidence-based improvements without disruptive policy churn and complexity.

**Manageability and balance:** maintaining stability while supporting improved quality, standards, industry alignment, and innovation

**Apprentice-focused approach:** improved accuracy, accessibility, outcomes, and fairness with developmental, stage-based, more authentic assessment.

**Expert support:** recognise information/expertise/support available and the need to secure productive partnerships from the outset.

**Continuous improvement:** standards improvement and quality assurance are a professional practice, not a one-off, supporting opportunity, aspiration, and excellence.



## About the EP/AO conference

The conference is owned and organised by the Apprenticeships & Skills Group. Their core mission is "We connect people" across the Employability & Skills sector. [www.apprenticeships-conference.com](http://www.apprenticeships-conference.com)



[linkedin.com/company/sdn-mesma-group](https://www.linkedin.com/company/sdn-mesma-group)

[www.strategicdevelopmentnetwork.co.uk/assessment-reform](http://www.strategicdevelopmentnetwork.co.uk/assessment-reform)

