

**Cognitive assessment tools and funding:**  
A practical guide for UK post-16 education




## Executive summary

Initial needs cognitive assessment tools have become increasingly popular in UK educational institutions supporting learners over age 16. While these tools offer valuable insights for identifying learners who may require additional support, there can be misconceptions about their role in securing additional learning support funding.

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This guide, created in partnership with compliance and quality expert David Lockhart-Hawkins, clarifies the true relationship between cognitive assessment tools and funding processes across the core funding streams, helping educational institutions set realistic expectations and develop effective support strategies.



### Key takeaway:

Assessment tools are screening and identification instruments. They are a part of the diagnostic identification of need and part of funding evidence but not the full solution. Evidencing funding differs per funding stream, but identification of need is the first part of the process. All programmes subsequently require evidence of meeting identified needs. This often includes tracking and documentation of adjustments made such as additional time, resources, and costs incurred when providing learning support services.

When multiple funding streams depend on ongoing participation – and in some cases, achievement – to generate all expected baseline funding (even before learning support funding is factored in), tools that identify barriers to engagement become highly valuable in helping organisations meet their funding goals.

## How funding works

Across the devolved nations, the approach to learning support funding differs per funding stream. Most carry similar broad principles of robust assessment of needs and then delivering planned support and providing evidence of that support journey.

The reason for supplemental funding to an institution is based on the legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 for organisations to make reasonable adjustments to prevent substantial disadvantage to individuals with a disability. In the Equality Act this is defined as a person that has a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities including the activities relevant to working life such as writing, typing, engaging in conversations and social interaction.<sup>1,2</sup>

In some specific education funding streams this definition is more broad. In apprenticeships, for example, the definition is the person having a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of persons of their age.<sup>3</sup>

### Funding streams generate the adjustment funding in different ways:



The 16-19 funding model affects FE and sixth form colleges, 16-19 academies, independent providers and others delivering study programmes and T Levels. A part of the funding formula that sets the annual funding rate per learner includes high needs learner funding (those with support needs whose support costs are more than £6,000). There is a need to understand the costs of support delivery, though there are limitations in budget that will affect an organisation's allocation.




In apprenticeships the funding is paid as a supplement and in principle could apply to every apprentice if they have an assessed need and there is planned support. Planned support must be delivered and the support arrangements regularly reviewed to prove funding is necessary. The evidence required is affected by the total value of funding claim.

<sup>1</sup> Equality Act 2010, S20

<sup>2</sup> [Equality Act Technical Guidance for FE and HE](#), Equality Human Rights Commission

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 34, [Apprenticeship Funding Rules 25-26 Version 2](#), DfE



In Adult Skills Fund or Advanced Learner Loans it is a contractually allocated value. This is based upon a strict Equality Act definition of learning difficulty or disability, need of assessment, planning support, delivering support and evidencing the ongoing delivery and necessity of funding.

Some programmes do not have additional funding, DfE funded Skills Bootcamps do not for example, though in devolved authorities some flexibilities exist.

For all programmes there is a consistent theme in evidence:



**Needs assessment**



**Confirmation of how the need affects the programme**



**Planning support**



**Delivering support**



**Reviewing support**

These elements are essential for ensuring funding, but equally they carry quality implications that would make an organisation's delivery more or less effective. So the more robust these steps are, the more effective the result for the learner and organisation.

The nature of adjustments will vary according to the need of the learner. Typically they will be an amendment to the way in which an activity is delivered or assessed.

- **Additional resources were deployed** beyond standard teaching provision.
- **Specific costs were incurred** that wouldn't normally be required.
- **Time and effort were additional** to standard educational delivery.

## What funding bodies want to see

When institutions apply for additional learning support funding, they typically need to provide evidence that meets specific standards outlined in DfE funding regulations:

### Needs assessment

Something robust that has expertise engaged to identify the presence of a need, whether originally known or not previously known. Expertise could be human or IT based, the key factor is whether the results are accurate, authentic and valid.

### Support plans

Detailed records showing the planned adjustments and logistics of how support will be tailored to specific learner needs. This plan is usually agreed with the learner. Good practice is a plan considering the environments of learning and assessment activity that meets the needs of the end users – not those of an auditor.

### Support review

The continuing necessity of the adjustment is important from a funding perspective. From a quality perspective the effectiveness of support needs to be known so a plan can be revised.

### Resource deployment evidence

In all programmes you would need evidence of the delivery of adjustments. Documentation of additional materials,

software, equipment, or specialist staff employed specifically for learning support – if they can be clearly separated from standard provision costs, provides stronger evidence.

### Cost analysis

In apprenticeships, if you claim above £150 a month you will need clear breakdowns of the additional costs incurred, including staff time, resources, and any external services, with evidence of actual expenditure rather than estimated needs. In 16–19 funding the identification of cost is an important factor in determining high needs, but in all programmes cost analysis is useful for effective budgeting and resource allocation.

### Outcome tracking

Evidence that the additional support made a measurable difference to learner progress and achievement is useful qualitatively, supporting the inclusion and completion rates in funding calculations.

The need of evidence creates an administrative burden requiring resource. You will need record-keeping systems, staff training on documentation requirements, and robust data management capabilities. Funding rules generally state that institutions must maintain evidence to support all funding claims, and it is good practice to monitor the evidence you hold through internal audit or other compliance monitoring.

## What assessment tools can and cannot do



### Assessment tools excel at

Initial needs cognitive assessment tools are digital platforms designed to screen learners for potential learning difficulties and support needs. They evaluate cognitive functions including processing speed, working memory, attention, and executive function.

#### Their primary value lies in:

- **Early identification** of potential learning difficulties that may affect engagement in the planned learning and assessment activities before they become significant barriers that could lead to disengagement.
- **Objective measurement** providing standardised, comparable data across learners.
- **Efficiency** in screening large numbers of learners quickly and cost-effectively.
- **Support planning foundation** offering insights that inform individualised support strategies.
- **Baseline establishment** providing data against which progress can be measured.



### Critical limitations

#### Assessment tools cannot:

- **Provide all compliance evidence.** Results alone don't constitute evidence of personalisation of a plan that is relevant to every programme or of effective resource deployment and review.
- **Create automatic funding entitlement.** Identifying a learning need doesn't automatically create funding eligibility. In apprenticeships, for example, having a need alone does not entitle you to funding. It is the need materially affecting the activities in the planned programme that make the learner eligible for support funding.
- **Track ongoing support activities.** Tools provide initial insights but don't document the ongoing support activities that funding bodies need to see.
- **Demonstrate actual costs.** Assessment results don't show the real costs incurred in providing additional support.

## Supporting the funding process

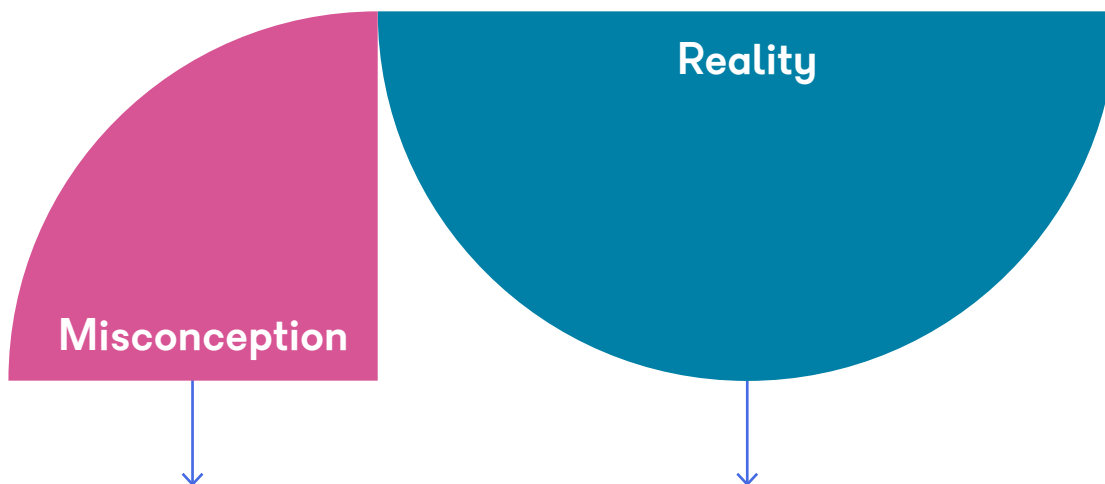


While assessment tools don't directly generate full funding evidence, they do support the broader process by:

- **Justifying support decisions** with objective data about why particular learners received additional support.
- **Planning resource deployment** by helping institutions understand the scale and nature of support needs.
- **Demonstrating a systematic approach** showing funders that robust processes exist for identifying learner needs.
- **Establishing baselines** for measuring progress and outcomes over time.



## Common misconceptions to avoid



- |                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>1.</b></p> <p><b>Assessment results equal funding entitlement</b></p>          | <p>Funding depends on demonstrating how the need affects the programme planned, the planning of support, the review of support, and in some cases actual additional costs incurred. Assessment results inform how a programme might need to be adjusted to meet the needs of an individual.</p>                                                                                                                  |
| <p><b>2.</b></p> <p><b>More sophisticated tools mean better funding outcomes</b></p> | <p>Being assured of support funding depends on the effectiveness of the full evidence pack for that programme. In programmes where participation generates ongoing funding, funding success depends on the quality of support provision and documentation, not the sophistication of identification tools. A good support programme will consider all the environments and tools in learning and assessment.</p> |
| <p><b>3.</b></p> <p><b>Assessment tools provide all necessary evidence</b></p>       | <p>Assessment tools provide identification insights, but funding requires evidence of more than this, such as planning (and agreement to that plan), actual support activities, review and costs over time.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <p><b>4.</b></p> <p><b>Assessment equals support</b></p>                             | <p>Assessment is the first step in the process: effective support requires ongoing, individualised intervention with comprehensive documentation that considers both funding and quality outcomes.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

## Building an effective framework



### Strategic approach

Use assessment tools as part of a broader system:

- ✓ Integrate assessment results with wider initial assessment including your staff observations, learner feedback, other stakeholder feedback (such as employers where relevant), and academic performance data.
- ✓ Develop detailed, individualised support plans with clear objectives and methods that take account of the planned learning and assessment environments.
- ✓ Implement robust systems for tracking time, resources, and activities.
- ✓ Establish regular review cycles to ensure support remains appropriate and effective.
- ✓ Train staff comprehensively on both support delivery and documentation requirements.
- ✓ Build effective but proportionate compliance controls when additional funding is obtained.



### Quality standards

Successful organisations maintain:

- ✓ Consistent documentation practices across all departments and staff.
- ✓ Professional-standard records meeting audit requirements.
- ✓ Clear audit trails from initial need identification through to outcome measurement.
- ✓ Regular monitoring and quality assurance processes.
- ✓ Integration between assessment tools and broader evidence management systems.
- ✓ Effective communication between delivery parties.



## Documentation excellence

### Focus on evidence that funding bodies need:

Funding rules across programmes vary but the following best practice applies:

- ✓ **Clear separation** between standard teaching and additional support provision in terms of support plans and support review.
- ✓ **A good plan** of support activities makes it easier for teachers, trainers and all other stakeholders to understand what is going to happen, when and how.
- ✓ **Contemporaneous recording** of additional support activities as they occur, using naturally occurring evidence when the opportunity arises. But be proportionate. Work from the support plan.
- ✓ **Specific detail** about what was done, for whom, and for how long. This should reflect the plan and if the plan needs to be revised, this needs to be re-agreed.
- ✓ **Comprehensive cost tracking** is necessary in programmes where support cost affects the funding claimed. In apprenticeships for example, if claiming above £150 per month ensure costs are identified and tracked to allow accurate and timely supplemental claims using the Earnings Adjustment Statement. This might include staff time, resources, and external services, with evidence that costs are “additional” to standard provision.
- ✓ **Outcome measurement** must demonstrate the effectiveness of additional support and its contribution to government retention and achievement targets.

## Conclusion: setting realistic expectations

Initial needs cognitive assessment tools are valuable instruments for identifying learners who may benefit from additional support and informing the development of effective intervention strategies that increase positive outcomes. However, they are screening and identification tools, not full funding evidence generators.



## Key takeaways

1.

**Assessment tools serve specific purposes** in initial screening and support planning but once need has been identified it is the effective planning, delivery and review of support that completes the evidence for funding.

2.

**Some programmes require evidence of actual costs** through detailed tracking of additional time, resources, and activities over time.

3.

**Systematic approaches work best** when assessment tools are integrated into comprehensive frameworks including robust delivery and documentation systems.

4.

**Delivery quality contributes to funding success** as much as the sophistication of initial assessment tools.

5.

**Realistic expectations enable better outcomes** by helping organisations make informed decisions about resource allocation and system development.

## Moving forward

### The most successful organisations will be those that:

- ✔ Use assessment tools strategically as a part of initial assessment of need, not standalone solutions.
- ✔ Focus on delivering individualised learning support that is effectively planned, communicated and reviewed.
- ✔ Develop sustainable approaches for tracking and evidencing additional support activities.
- ✔ Maintain realistic expectations about what assessment tools can and cannot achieve.
- ✔ Focus on building a process between a learner being identified by the assessment solution and their individualised support package that follows, that delivers the best outcome for each learner.

The goal should not be to find the perfect assessment tool that will solve all funding challenges, but rather to focus on developing effective processes that leverage the right tools to identify individual learner needs, deliver appropriate support, and generate the comprehensive evidence required to sustain and expand support services over time.

By understanding the true role of assessment tools within the broader funding landscape, educational institutions can make more informed decisions, set appropriate expectations, and build sustainable frameworks for supporting learners who need additional help.




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**Kelly McAllister**, Head of  
Apprenticeships, Bradford College

For more  
information contact

**enquiries@  
aptem.co.uk**  
**020 3758 8540**

This guide provides general guidance on the role of cognitive assessment tools in additional learning support funding. Individual circumstances may vary, and institutions should consult with relevant funding bodies and professional advisors when developing their specific approaches.





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