

Testing, Trialling, and Refining Development of New Qualifications, Certifying Organisation and Recognition of Prior Learning

Main Authors: Julian Berriman and Cliff Collins

Date of Publication: 18th December 2020

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. A common assessment strategy	2
3. Feedback from accredited training providers	5
4. Online theory assessment	8
5. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)	11
6. Conclusion	14



1. Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the context and development of the BLUEPRINT *Intellectual Output (IO) 9 – Testing, trialling, and refining development of new qualifications, certifying organisation and recognition of prior learning*. This IO should be read in conjunction with *IO4 – Scoping of the European Certifying Organisation for the Active Leisure sector*, *IO5 – New and updated qualification for fitness (personal trainer) and outdoors (animator) for pan-European use* and *IO8 – Validation of informal and non-formal learning in active leisure*.

The qualifications which have been developed under the auspices of the Certifying Organisation (CO) and the processes that support the implementation of the qualifications are at the heart of the development of new skills for current and future workers in the Active Leisure sector. IO9 represents the work that has been done to test and trial the structures and tools developed in IOs 4, 5 and 8 and to elicit feedback from stakeholders and potential end users of these structures and tools.

This work was envisaged towards the end of the BLUEPRINT project in 2020 and consequently has been impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns. Most of the vocationally-based training providers have been unable to deliver many aspects of their training programmes, some stopped altogether, and others delayed teaching and assessments until much later in the year – or even until 2021. This has inevitably adversely affected attempts to get their feedback on the outcomes expected during practical testing and trialling planned for IO9. This has meant that there has been a larger focus on gaining feedback on the qualifications developed in IO5 and their associated assessment strategy. While all aspects of the Personal Trainer (PT) qualification assessment strategy have been subject to review and feedback, there has been a particular emphasis on the online assessment aspect of that strategy. This assessment, however, has some enormously important potential bearings since the implementation of a qualification with a common online assessment for training providers across Europe would be a significant step forward toward the goal of establishing greater standardisation of the qualifications that underpin the European Active Leisure workforce.

The Outdoor sector has been even more severely hit than the fitness sector in 2020 with COVID-19 with an almost complete shutdown for most of the year and so the focus for IO9 reporting has been based on the experience of the fitness sector.

2. A common assessment strategy

No qualification is complete unless it has appropriate assessment of the students at the end of their learning. The intention and concept of developing a common assessment strategy is to provide assessments that must be implemented by all training providers looking to gain recognition against a common standard. All identified assessments must be taken and passed by any learner in order to be certified and formally recognised as qualified to perform the job role described in the qualification. A common assessment strategy is very much in line with the implementation of a learning outcomes-



based approach. Qualification inputs (e.g., delivery hours, mode of delivery) and the quality of those inputs are always important but ultimately competency to perform a job role must be judged on outputs, that is, the ability to meet the requirements outlined in the learning outcomes.

It is the role of the proposed CO to develop an agreed common assessment strategy. This strategy was based on a series of assessments that cover all the learning outcomes and their associated assessment criteria contained within the PT qualification. In identifying and constructing these assessments a number of other factors were considered (as also described in IO5):

- Covering the main learning outcomes and their associated assessment criteria,
- How to best show that learners have achieved outcomes,
- The concepts the learner should master and at what level,
- The skills to be acquired,
- The authenticity of the task and whether it is set in a realistic context (i.e., oriented towards the world external to the course itself),
- Whether tasks are worthwhile learning activities in their own right and contribute to learning,
- The tasks are not overly repetitive for either student or assessor - they represent a productive use of time for all those involved,
- The assessment prompts student self-assessment and reflective practice,
- The tasks are sufficiently flexible for students to tailor them to their own needs and interests,
- The assessment is not likely to be interpreted by students in a way fundamentally different to that intended by those setting the assessment,
- Whether the assessment is reasonable with respect to the student and tutor workload,
- Providing a variety of assessment methods,
- The assessments permit a holistic rather than a fragmented approach,
- What assessments can be done in and away from the face-to-face learning environment,
- The time required to mark the assessment,
- Whether the assessment would be marked internally (by the training provider) or externally (by the CO),
- Whether the assessment is free from bias, transparent, valid, and reliable.

The complete assessment strategy for the PT qualification is available on request but in summary it consists of:

Assignment – Developing a personal training business

This assessment predominantly addresses the unit ‘Role of the Personal Trainer’ and more specifically relates to learning outcomes focused on the legal and professional standards and guidelines relevant to personal training, utilising technology to engage and support personal training clients, the business and sales skills required to run a successful personal training business, building a personal training business and customer care.

The tasks contained within the assessment include:

Testing, trialling, and refining development of new qualifications, certifying organisation and recognition of prior learning



- researching the legal and professional requirements, standards and guidelines a personal trainer must follow in their country,
- giving examples of ethical and unethical personal training practice,
- researching the different types of technologies currently available to engage and support adherence to physical activity, assess health, fitness and performance and improve health, fitness and performance,
- planning a self-employed personal training business.

Case study

This assessment involves working with a real client from the point of consultation to programme implementation and therefore, covers a wide range of learning outcomes from a number of units including, 'Understand the principles of health and fitness behaviour change', 'Collecting and analysing health and fitness assessment information', 'Nutrition and healthy eating for personal trainers' and 'Training adaptation, exercise planning and programming'.

Case study tasks include:

- Conducting a client consultation,
- Conducting medical screening and health assessments,
- Conducting a diet and lifestyle evaluation,
- Conducting a behaviour change evaluation,
- Conducting a posture and movement assessment,
- Conducting fitness assessments,
- Goal setting for the client,
- Writing a periodised programme,
- Conducting a reflective evaluation of all of the above.

Skills observations

This assessment involves actual observations of the skills of learners in conducting consultations, assessments and personal training delivery. As again this assessment covers a wide range of skills it addresses learning outcomes from several units including the 'Role of the personal trainer', 'Collecting and analysing health and fitness assessment information' and 'Training adaptation, exercise planning and programming'.

Learners must conduct a consultation and fitness assessments under the observation of an assessor who marks the learner against pre-set assessment checklists. Similarly, the learner must perform a realistic personal training delivery session in a gym and be assessed against a pre-set skills observation checklist. The learner must then complete a self-evaluation of their own performance in each of the skills observations.

Viva

At the end of the personal training delivery session an assessor asks a minimum of three questions from a pre-set table of questions and learners are given a maximum of 2 minutes to provide each

answer, giving real world examples to illustrate their answers. This assessment covers learning outcomes contained within the unit 'Training adaptation, exercise planning and programming'.

Multiple choice question paper

This assessment is discussed in the review of the online assessment trial below.

3. Feedback from accredited training providers

The following invitation was sent to training providers from 5 countries (Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Belgium and Greece) to canvass their opinions on the PT qualification developed as part of the Blueprint project and its associate common assessment strategy:

'As part of the Blueprint for Skills Cooperation and Employment in Active Leisure EU Project, EuropeActive has been looking at some of the necessary structures and processes to put in place to offer a certification service to training providers. The intention is to design a complete assessment strategy for the Personal Trainer standard.'

Providers were then asked to provide comments on 3 documents (please note: for commercial and IP reasons these are available on request) which explained in detail the full proposed assessment strategy:

Document 1 – PT Qualification Summary

As described in IO5, the EuropeActive PT standards were developed into a qualification with distinct units of learning outcomes. This document gives a summary of the qualification, the units and the associated learning hours.

Document 2 – PT Qualification Unit Breakdown

This document gives a more detailed breakdown of the qualification including the units with their learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria (i.e., the criteria that must be met for the learning outcome to be achieved). All the assessment criteria are colour-coded and matched to a particular assessment as part of a total assessment strategy. Under such as a strategy every assessment criterion is assessed with an appropriate assessment.

Document 3 – PT Qualification Workbook

This document provides a workbook for students which details an assessment plan and all the assessments required of them (e.g., assignment, case study, skills observation, viva etc). There are also some marking sheets available for the tutor who would be completing the assessment.

In relation to the above documents, the training companies were asked to provide their response to these questions:

1. *Do you think a common assessment strategy implemented by EuropeActive is a worthwhile aim? Yes/No – please give reasons for your answer.*

Generally, the responses to this question were extremely positive. A common assessment strategy to be applied by all training providers was seen as a useful tool for keeping training providers ‘on their toes’ by providing a common line and standard to be achieved by all. In this way, the quality of the educational process would be preserved, and best practice more consistently applied. Any deviations from the standards where some training providers might sacrifice quality to sell courses at more competitive prices would be exposed through a common assessment. While one reply expressed concern that some providers might see a common assessment approach as ‘authoritarianism’, and was being imposed on them against their wishes. It was felt that if such a reaction happened it might indicate that the training company had ‘something to hide’ and did not want to subject themselves to this higher level of scrutiny. In this sense, the transparency that a common assessment strategy provides was ‘an absolute necessity when standardising’.

It was also believed that having a common assessment implemented by a third-party CO would upgrade the perceived value and prestige associated with its certifications.

While responses to this question were generally positive there were some notes of caution expressed. One provider pointed out that such a common assessment does not take into consideration the different stages of market development in different countries both in terms of legal requirements and technological advancement. Consequently, setting a universal standard through common assessment based on the highest European standard could possibly exclude others from achieving certification and therefore, from obtaining work. Such concerns did not negate the value of such assessment but indicated that its introduction would best to be phased in over several years to ‘bring along’ all countries and markets. This phased approach would focus on introducing elements of the assessment strategy in an agreed order to make the necessary changes both feasible and affordable, as there would likely be significant operational and cost implications for providers.

There was also a plea for flexibility in the application of assessments. Providers should have the discretion to be able to organise the assessment in a way that works for them and their context. One respondent was a VET provider whilst also offering university programmes in a higher education setting (e.g. sports science). They believed that a common assessment would need to be adaptable to both situations and deliver models if it were to be successfully applied. This same provider also believed that a common assessment linked to learning outcomes would be useful as part of a flexible approach to validating prior learning.

2. *Do you think the qualification and assessment materials outlined in the documents are useful and represent a fair assessment of the PT qualification? Yes/No – please give reasons for your answer.*

Generally, the responses received regarding the assessment materials were very positive, quoting remarks such as:

‘...the standards and the assessment materials developed by you are most helpful and guiding.’

The qualification unit structure was well received in relation to its ease of use and for setting-up training course structures. There were, however, some concerns raised as to whether the various assessments would work in a wholly online environment and, regarding the accessibility of the materials for those for whom English is not their first language. It was suggested that the assessments were currently very detailed and that if the language used is too technical it might result in reduced adherence and participation levels. A note of caution was also expressed to try to avoid creating an expectation of a ‘one-size fits all market’ that did not take into consideration all different models of training delivery and the individuality of a personal trainer role.

It was interesting to note that while some providers were concerned about not trying to apply generalised standards to all providers others expressed a need for even further standardisation. This would need moving from general, broad interpretations of qualification requirements to more precise guidelines including the provision of teaching materials (e.g., a set bibliography), stipulated learning hours for each educational unit (these are already in place), and an educational path, ‘road map’ or syllabus to reach the point of assessment.

3. *Do you think the assessment would be achievable for learners? Yes/No - please give reasons for your answer.*

The issue of language was raised again here recognising that many Europeans are admirably adapted in reading and speaking English, but a test adds a level of stress that can affect self-confidence and increase feelings of uncertainty, doubt, or vulnerability. Best practice would therefore be to send out the assessments in European languages.

Whether or not the assessments would be achievable would also depend on how much of the full assessment strategy would be applied and required. This again spoke to the need for a phased approach in the introduction of the various components of the assessment strategy to all time for understanding, implementation, and refinement. It was also stipulated that the assessments should be introduced as a point of reference and support for providers rather than being made obligatory.

Other providers believed that the proposed assessment strategy was entirely feasible. A variant of it had already been applied by one provider for years, without problems and with considerable success. The provider in question believed that they already covered all aspects of the strategy and in addition also provided thematic and periodic evaluation through online and live theoretical and practical tests, periodic self-assessment (by the trainee himself). These were conducted through automated online tests, additional assignments and presentations by the trainees, oral interviews with trainees and regular individual evaluation reports. They also added that they videotaped all final practical assessment exams and kept them on file for two years, so that they were available for verification and validity.

4. *Do you think training providers would be able to implement the identified assessments? Yes/No - please give reasons for your answer.*

Responses varied on this question. The majority of responses indicated that training providers would be able to implement the identified assessments although the ease of this would depend on the delivery model in place (e.g., as part of VET or as part of a higher education degree programme). It would also be important that providers' compliance to these assessments was subject to monitoring procedures from a third-party organisation. It was particularly interesting to note that the question was raised as to whether the assessment of trainees should be done internally, by trainers of the training provider, or by third party certified evaluators, or a combination of both.

There was again a note that if the complete assessment strategy were introduced at this point many providers would not currently be able to implement it fully. The best approach would be to phase-in implementation over time so that the necessary human and financial resources could be planned and committed in a manageable way.

5. *Do you think European training providers would be happy to work with EuropeActive to implement such an assessment strategy? Yes/No - please give reasons for your answer.*

Responses to this question varied. There were those providers who were wholly behind the assessment strategy and its intentions although they were unsure as to whether other providers would be similarly supportive. While others would be content if the strategy were applied with flexibility and could be adapted to specific conditions. It was felt that acceptance might be increased if the strategy was promoted as a means of assuring the quality of graduates produced.

There was a call to establish a voluntary focus group of providers to introduce the strategy over time (between 2021-2024). This would allow everyone to be heard, ensure that providers take ownership of the task at hand and maximise the impact of the proposed strategy.

4. Online theory assessment

Part of the proposed common assessment strategy for the PT qualification was a multiple-choice theory assessment. The original intention of this theory assessment was to attempt to cover certain learning outcomes and their associated assessment criteria within the overall qualification. These outcomes largely focused on functional anatomy and physiology, nutrition and the components of health and fitness. However, as it has become increasingly clear that the introduction of a full assessment using multiple assessment modalities (e.g., case studies, assignment, theory assessments) might be impractical across multiple European countries the remit of this assessment has shifted. Consequently, the theory assessment trialled as part of this IO was, what might be referred to as, a holistic assessment, the intention of this holistic assessment being to cover, as much as possible, all learning outcomes covered within the PT qualification.

Initially 150 multiple choice questions were written and trialled internally with the EuropeActive internal verification team. Questions were then reviewed and adapted where necessary in light of feedback from this team. Once the final 150 questions were agreed upon these were then placed on a Moodle platform and a questions bank created. Accredited training providers from 5 European countries were contacted and agreed that their learners would be part of the trialling of this assessment. The 150 questions were then randomised, and learners were able to attempt a random sample of 50 questions in an allotted time of 60 minutes. The pass mark for the assessment was set at 70% and learners were instructed to complete the assessment under normal exam conditions.

Results

- 69% of respondents replied 'yes' when asked if they thought that all training providers should use the same online examination for their Personal Trainer qualifications.
- 81% of respondents replied 'yes' when asked if they thought the online assessment covered the Personal Trainer course syllabus.
- 87.5% of respondents believed that the online assessment was 'moderate' in terms of its difficulty. The remain 12.5% believing it was either 'difficult' or 'too difficult'.
- 56% of respondents would prefer a greater variety of question types (e.g., pictures, drag and drop, missing words, short answers) and not just multiple-choice questions.
- 63% believed that the multiple-choice questions were either 'clear' or 'very clear', 31% 'mixed' and 6% 'unclear'.
- The average grade for the assessment was 69%, the highest mark achieved being 93% and the lowest mark achieved being 48%.
- 70% of those taking the online assessment achieved the required 70% pass mark.

From the comments received from both students and verifiers taking the online assessment the following themes and comments were identified:

Quality of questions

- Some questions were a bit 'wordy' they could have been made simpler,
- Some questions had more than one answer,
- A greater range on types of questions would be useful to cover different learning styles,
- The level of some questions is questionable,
- It would probably be useful to consider weighting certain areas of standards in other papers to ensure the level of the paper overall is pitched correctly,
- Stating or implying 'always' or 'only' is very dangerous in fitness as it is either leading, or just plain wrong with a higher level of knowledge e.g., an experienced PT will tend to avoid a



definitive as they understand the variability of an outcome due to individuality and specificity, whereas a lower-level candidate will happily reach for the definitive – this results in an unconscious bias that could result in higher level students getting the Q wrong and lower level students achieving,

- There is often a leading nature to the answers and distractors so if you take a step back you can guess the right action by the way it is worded. This would give students with better English language skills an advantage.

Language barriers

- The questions are often overly complex and require a good understanding of English. Long questions and answers are not ideal even when testing in a native language,
- Principles, terminology and abbreviations may not be consistent across all countries e.g., Type 1, slow twitch muscle fibres, PAR-Q, PNF,
- Depending on the region, the difficulty of the questions will vary. Where an academic background, as opposed to a vocational background is more common, they will struggle in certain areas and vice versa.

Timing and length

- 60 minutes for 50 questions for non-native speakers is not long enough,
- More time and more questions (e.g., 100 questions in 100 minutes) may be useful to ensure a more fair and accurate assessment.

Assessment security

- With no invigilation the security and integrity of the exam is easily compromised. A learner could have other browsers open to assist with answers as the assessment was not invigilated.

Pass mark and referrals

- Pass mark was not clear,
- Clear guidelines will need to be established as to how many times the exam can be taken.

General

- Online assessments that incorporate multi-choice questions in an exam environment which is properly invigilated to avoid any malpractice is a necessity that provides a very clear demonstration of the persons knowledge. This type of exam is tried and trusted,
- In terms of assessment, more guidance on the practical assessments would be useful. Benchmarks of minimum requirements would be helpful to set European standard as currently this ranges hugely.

Conclusions

Implementing a common online theory assessment across multiple countries is, at times, a rather daunting undertaking although this trialling exercise has yielded some incredibly useful information to inform future strategy in this area.

Although 70% of those taking the assessment achieved the required mark, consideration must be given to both the type of questions asked and the complexity of these questions. To some extent, language barriers will always be an issue (even if the assessment can be provided in the main European languages), so the length of questions and the simplicity of wording needs real attention. The introduction of multiple question types (not just multiple-choice questions) may well be useful in this regard. Consideration will also need to be given to the length of time allowed to take the assessment to allow for any difficulties with translation. The use of terminology and abbreviations will also need further attention as assumptions cannot be made about commonality of their use across Europe.

Procedures and software will need to be identified to ensure the appropriate levels of invigilation so that the security and integrity of online assessment is not compromised. There will also need to be clear processes in place for retaking the assessment. These processes should allow an identified number of retakes and systems should allow that these assessments are randomised on each occasion.

Despite some difficulties with single use of English as the language, the fact that 70% of those taking the assessment achieved the required mark and, that the average mark was 69% provides a general indication that the trialled online assessment provided a sufficiently realistic and demanding theoretical assessment of the PT qualification. Indications for future development might include the provision of assessments in multiple languages, the use of multiple question types, and the implementation of appropriate security and retake procedures.

5. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

RPL is a process which facilitates the recognition of an applicant's or learner's prior learning, either qualification-based or experiential, to grant them an exemption from studying one or more units or modules on their programme.

It is often the case that those wanting to join a particular course of study will already have accumulated some prior achievement or experience. It was an important goal of the Blueprint project to identify a potential policy for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) that could be applied by a Certifying Organisation. It was hoped that the application of such a policy would help to remove unnecessary duplication and repetition of learning. Reference should be made here to IO6 Application of ECVET and ECTS to new qualifications which describes a credit system to accumulate and transfer learning outcomes through the assignment of ECVET and ECTS points to qualifications from the active leisure sector. Such a system would be an invaluable tool in the application of the RPL processes described below.



In introducing an RPL system it was decided that the responsibility for RPL decisions should lie with training providers although they should be able to refer to the CO for guidance and support if required. Providers would need to check all evidence provided by learners, be it educational or occupational, against the units, learning outcomes and assessment criteria contained within a qualification.

The learner will need to apply for RPL if they feel their qualifications and experience merit such an application. This would require submission of the relevant evidence to the training organisation who would then make an RPL decision based on this evidence. All evidence supplied would have to be deemed to be sufficient (covering all required areas), authentic (not fraudulent) and reliable (referring to the credibility of a source that is being used as evidence e.g., witness testimony).

The learner will need to apply for RPL if they feel their qualifications and experience merit such an application. This would require submission of the relevant evidence to the training organisation who would then make an RPL decision based on this evidence. All evidence supplied would have to be deemed to be sufficient (covering all required areas), authentic (not fraudulent) and reliable (referring to the credibility of a source that is being used as evidence e.g., witness testimony).

Examples of acceptable evidence types within the RPL process would include:

- **Certificates** – original qualification certificates will be required. Photocopies will not be accepted. If any doubt exists about the authenticity of a certificate, then appropriate checks should be made, or guidance sought from the CO.
- **Work experience** – all work experiences should be clearly identified and recorded. These records need to be individually dated and signed by both the learner and a suitable representative of the employer.
- **Witness testimony** – to ensure their reliability witnesses giving testimony should be occupationally relevant and suitably qualified in relation to the learner’s chosen area of study.

There are several potential outcomes to an RPL request:

Exemption from assessment

It may be appropriate that the learner is given exemption from assessment. This may be found to be the case if a recognised certificate held by the learner is deemed to be the equivalent of an assessed unit/s of a qualification. In this case, it is important to clearly establish that all assessment criteria within a unit are covered. It would also be important that the currency of the qualification is checked (obtained in the last 3 years). If the qualification is not deemed current then the applicant will need to show evidence of their efforts, in terms of on-going continuing education or experience, that has enabled them to maintain the knowledge, skills and competencies covered by the qualification.

In the event of the implementation of a common assessment strategy for the PT qualification training providers would need to inform the CO of any RPL exemption(s) when claiming certification for the learner.

Fast tracking to assessment

If a learner's evidence is deemed to be insufficient to approve exemption from assessment, then it may be possible to fast track the learners straight to assessment without having to engage in the related learning experiences. It will need to be established that the learner is not disadvantaged by fast tracking and realistically has the necessary knowledge and skills to meet the assessment requirements. The learner should fully agree to the fast tracking and records should be kept in the event of any appeal by the learner once the assessment has been taken.

Insufficient evidence

If evidence is deemed to be insufficient the learner will be required to complete all lessons and assessments contained within a qualification.

In all the above cases, records should be kept of all RPL decisions and the feedback given to learners on these decisions. These will be important in the event of any appeals against an RPL decision but will also be useful for training providers in standardising their RPL processes. These records should also be maintained and available on request for CO sampling purposes. The CO would want to see an appropriate amount of rigour and attention to detail in these records.



6. Conclusion

It is undoubtedly true that the focus of this IO has been the implementation of a common assessment strategy in relation to EuropeActive's PT qualification. Such assessments are a critical function of the Certifying Organisation since the assessment of learning outcomes is a central principle underpinning the implementation of qualifications against the European Qualifications Framework.

Common assessments and the certification that follows would allow the CO to establish a first-person relationship with learners and in this way to better ensure the quality of the learning experience for them. To implement common assessment learners would first need to be registered by training providers with the CO which provides immediate reassurance to those learners that the training they received is being monitored and assured by a recognised, credible, and independent third party. Once implemented a common assessment would allow the CO to track the achievement rates of learners across their accredited providers and allow it to better identify both good practice and poor provision. But perhaps most importantly, by setting a standard that must be achieved such common assessment would go a considerable way in supporting EuropeActive to assure the knowledge, skills, and competences of those entering the fitness and physical activity workforce.

Finally, the feedback received from training providers, learners and verifiers alike would indicate that there is certainly an appetite for the implementation of a common assessment strategy. However, there is still some work to do in terms of pitching these assessments at the right level in terms of complexity, overcoming language barriers, and gaining the support of all training providers across multiple countries in this initiative. As marked-up in the feedback this work will be best achieved through the on-going involvement and consultation with all key stakeholders to ensure best practices and a wide acceptance of any new requirements.