

Participation and Progress Assurance Pressure Test

A practical tool for leaders, quality teams and governors

Purpose

This pressure test helps providers examine whether the learner journey described in curriculum plans, assessment records, reviews, support arrangements and quality processes is being implemented, experienced and evaluated as intended. It applies to every learner and apprentice, not only those with identified needs or visible barriers.

It is designed to challenge false reassurance. A completed process is not evidence of an effective experience. A learner who is attending, busy or achieving may still be compensating for weaknesses in teaching, communication, feedback or support.

The governing test

Can the organisation connect what it intended, what people did, what the learner experienced and what changed as a result?

How to use the pressure test

Use the questions primarily as a facilitated or triangulated discussion in leadership, curriculum, quality-improvement or governance activity. Do not attempt to manufacture an answer for every question in one meeting. Select the areas where assurance is weakest, agree the learner group, programme, curriculum area, employer, site or organisation being examined, and include the people whose perspectives are needed for a credible judgement.

Revisit the selected priorities at an agreed point to test whether action changed implementation, learner experience or impact. The response record at the end is for priority findings, not line-by-line completion of the whole diagnostic.

For each question, test five things

- What evidence do we have, and what does it actually demonstrate?
- Whose perspective is represented or missing?
- What remains uncertain, inconsistent or overly dependent on individual effort?
- What alternative explanation or evidence might challenge the emerging judgement?
- What proportionate action, ownership, success evidence and review point follow?

Confidence scale

Secure: Evidence is triangulated, includes learner experience and shows consistent positive impact.

Developing: Relevant evidence exists, but consistency, reach or impact is not yet secure.

Unclear: Activity is visible, but the learner experience or effect cannot be demonstrated.

Priority: Evidence indicates that learners may not be receiving or benefiting from the intended experience.

Response and action rules

- Select Secure only where the evidence is credible, triangulated and sufficiently consistent for the context being examined.
- Convert a material Developing judgement into a named improvement action, intended success evidence and review date.
- Treat Unclear as an information need, not reassurance. Record what is missing, who must contribute and when the judgement will be revisited.
- Act, redesign or escalate a Priority finding in proportion to both the evidence and the likely consequence. Do not wait for perfect certainty where the potential effect on learners is material.

1. Intent: What was supposed to happen?

Intent establishes the planned learner journey. It does not prove that the journey is happening.

- Is the curriculum ambitious, coherent and relevant to learners' starting points, aspirations, programmes and employment contexts?
- Do initial and diagnostic assessments identify information that can genuinely inform teaching, support and progression?
- Are individual learning plans purposeful and usable, or primarily evidence that a planning process was completed?
- Are intended outcomes clear enough for learners, practitioners, employers and support staff to recognise meaningful progress?
- Have likely barriers to access, participation and progression been anticipated without lowering expectations or making assumptions?
- Is responsibility clear when the learner journey crosses curriculum, support, English, Maths, Digital Skills and the workplace?

2. Implementation: What actually happened?

Implementation tests whether plans and information changed everyday practice.

- Can practitioners explain how starting-point information has influenced teaching, sequencing, contextualisation and support?
- Are agreed approaches applied consistently across practitioners, sites, online delivery and workplaces?
- Are individual plans and curriculum decisions revisited when confidence, circumstances or progress change?
- Do reviews lead to decisions and changed action, or mainly record activity and completion?
- Are employers given practical information and support that they can use during everyday work?
- When early signals appear, is there a clear route for investigation, coordination and timely response?
- Does quality assurance identify where implementation depends on one unusually skilled, persistent or determined person?

3. Experience: What could the learner access and use?

An approach may be delivered as planned and still be poorly timed, inaccessible or insufficiently relevant.

- Can learners explain where they are in their journey, what they are developing and what they need to do next?
- Can learners understand and use the feedback, guidance and support they receive?
- Does the format, timing and context of feedback support this learner to act or adapt, rather than merely demonstrate that feedback was given?
- Do learners experience assessment and review as part of learning, or as processes done to them?
- Are learners able to communicate emerging difficulty without needing to fail loudly enough to trigger attention?
- Do quieter, more compliant or highly self-motivated learners receive sufficient development and challenge?
- Does learner voice confirm the organisation's account, including where experiences differ between groups, sites, practitioners or employers?

4. Impact: What changed, and how do we know?

Impact asks whether the learner became better able to participate, learn, apply and progress.

- What evidence shows that learners are developing secure knowledge, skills and behaviours rather than simply completing activities?
- Did feedback lead to improved understanding, independence, application or quality of work?
- Did support improve access, confidence, participation or progress? What evidence supports that conclusion?
- Where an approach was ineffective, how quickly was this recognised and adapted?
- Are learners making meaningful progress from their starting points and towards their intended destinations?
- Would learners who currently appear confident, capable and committed still be participating if they were less determined or less able to compensate for weaknesses around them?
- Are apparently successful outcomes concealing unnecessary struggle, dependence or unequal access to a good experience?

5. Organisational learning and governance

Quality assurance should make individual experience knowable and significant patterns visible. Governance assurance must reach beyond whether the system operated. It must show whether the system worked.

- Which learners are attending and completing but not making meaningful progress?
- Where do participation, progress or experience vary across programmes, learner groups, practitioners, sites, employers or delivery models?
- What do leaders know about learners who succeed through exceptional personal determination?



- How quickly do early concerns become informed and coordinated action?
- What evidence shows that quality-improvement activity changed teaching, support or the learner experience?
- Where are leaders least confident in the assurance they currently receive?
- Do reports to governors distinguish activity, implementation, learner experience and impact?
- Can governors see the evidence behind positive totals as well as the risks concealed by averages?

Board-level synthesis

- What are we confident is working consistently for every learner, and what evidence gives us that confidence?
- Where is our assurance based mainly on completed processes or positive totals?
- Which learners or experiences may be least visible in our current evidence?
- What requires further investigation, improvement or external challenge?
- When will the board receive evidence that the agreed action changed the learner experience?

Responsible use and escalation

This pressure test is a conversation and decision-support tool. It does not produce an inspection grade and is not a substitute for professional judgement or for safeguarding, legal, HR, reasonable-adjustment, clinical or specialist advice. Use information proportionately, respect confidentiality and involve affected people appropriately.

Where discussion identifies an immediate safeguarding concern or material risk to a learner, follow the provider's established reporting and escalation arrangements. Do not delay necessary action while seeking additional assurance evidence.

Closing challenge

A quality system cannot be calibrated against the learners most able to compensate for its weaknesses.

The planned learner journey is not necessarily the learner's journey. Strong assurance connects intent, implementation, experience and impact, then uses what it learns to improve what happens next.

From insight to improvement

If the pressure test exposes recurring gaps across programmes, teams, employers or learner groups, the issue may require more than an isolated action. Creating Excellence can support leaders, quality teams and governors through facilitated assurance reviews, leadership and governance development, and tailored quality-improvement activity that turns evidence into sustainable practice.

To discuss what the findings may mean for your organisation, contact Creating Excellence.

Companion resource to The Learner Journey Looks Good on Paper. But Is It Really Happening?

by Christine Edwards QTLS, Creating Excellence.

Evidence, action and review record

Priority findings 1–2

Use this record only for the most important questions selected through the pressure test. Record evidence that already exists through normal practice; do not create paperwork purely to satisfy the tool. Keep evidence, interpretation, uncertainty and action distinct.

Priority 1

Priority question or area	
Evidence reviewed and sources	
What does the evidence demonstrate?	
Missing or differing perspectives	
Uncertainty, assumptions or alternative explanations	
Action, owner and completion date	
Success evidence and review date	

Priority 2

Priority question or area	
Evidence reviewed and sources	
What does the evidence demonstrate?	
Missing or differing perspectives	
Uncertainty, assumptions or alternative explanations	
Action, owner and completion date	
Success evidence and review date	

Evidence, action and review record

Priority findings 3–4

At the review point, return to the original evidence and intended success signal. Ask what changed in implementation, learner experience or impact, and whether a further action, escalation or wider organisational response is required.

Priority 3

Priority question or area	
Evidence reviewed and sources	
What does the evidence demonstrate?	
Missing or differing perspectives	
Uncertainty, assumptions or alternative explanations	
Action, owner and completion date	
Success evidence and review date	

Priority 4

Priority question or area	
Evidence reviewed and sources	
What does the evidence demonstrate?	
Missing or differing perspectives	
Uncertainty, assumptions or alternative explanations	
Action, owner and completion date	
Success evidence and review date	