

National guidance on numeracy and literacy skills in health and care

Spring 2025

On 11th February 2025, the [Department for Education](#) announced that the requirement for all apprentices in all sectors to study functional skill qualifications (FSQs) will now be determined by the apprentice's employer. This represents a new approach to functional skills qualifications in apprenticeships.

Numeracy, literacy and digital skills remain important for all occupations in health and care, however. In most cases, these skills will be aligned strongly to the requirements of the occupational Knowledge Skills and Behaviours (KSBs) in the relevant apprenticeship. These are already designed to meet occupational competence and deliver safe, quality patient care.

To deliver best practice in all apprenticeships, the employer, education provider and the apprentice themselves must all be aligned on this skill set. Best practice cannot be achieved without this. What this new flexibility gives employers (and education providers) is flexibility around *how* this is achieved. **Functional Skills Qualifications (FSQs) can still be used (and are still funded) to assess Maths and English competency.** However, if an employer, or education provider, would like to use different qualifications and/or methods to do this, they now can.

The new rules state that the study of FSQs is now optional and in the gift of the employer. It is not for either the education provider, or the apprentice, to take the decision to stop studying their FSQ, without consultation with both other parties.

All employers and education providers should still aspire to providing access to high quality English and maths training. This is so that the literacy and numeracy skills for each post are achieved and for the purposes of the apprentice's future development.

NHS England's national position

This policy change gives flexibility for those who find it too challenging to study FSQs alongside their apprenticeship and also to individuals who have attained an occupationally appropriate level of numeracy and literacy but not a FSQ specifically (e.g. many overseas learners). This brings advantages to:

1. those who previously had to pass an FSQ because they didn't have one (or evidence of one), despite tri-partite agreement that the individual was already occupationally competent in numeracy and literacy.
2. those who may still need an FSQ (e.g. because of HEI and/or employer entry requirements for their next career step) but are finding it too challenging to study it alongside their apprenticeship and would benefit from delaying these areas of study until they have passed their apprenticeship

For many learners, it will not remove the need to acquire FSQs entirely. This is because for many roles in health and social care, these qualifications are still required by the HEI or employer. NHS England highly advocates for appropriate training in numeracy and literacy alongside apprenticeships, wherever possible.

Relevant policy detail

- These changes came into effect on 11th February 2025
- They apply to all learners already/currently on programme, across all sectors and professions
- Employers must agree with apprentices to continue or discontinue studying towards FSQs by 1st April 2025 and relay this decision to education providers
- Education providers must ensure the outcome of the discussion between the employer and apprentice is recorded in the training plan
- NHS England's funded provision is **not** affected by this policy change. Self-study through bksb and exams through Open Awards will still be available to all, free of charge until at least March 2027. Staff should be encouraged to utilise this where they would benefit from it.
- Funding will continue to be available for FSQs for those over 19 if the employer feels this is required. Employers are empowered to ask education providers to deliver this and should utilise it. If an apprentice stops studying FSQs, this decision can be changed later (further detail on this towards the end of this document).
- Apprentices aged 16-18 at the start of their apprenticeship are still required to secure up to a Level 2 FSQ in English and maths, if they do not already hold one.

- For the NHS, the employer is the apprentice's individual employer i.e. the trust/GP surgery/care home. It is not the NHS as an overarching organisation.
- This policy change does not affect HEI entry criteria. If a university previously required a grade 4 in level 2 (e.g. GCSE or FSQ) English and maths to start a course, this will remain.
- Although FSQs were officially an exit requirement previously, many HEIs set them as entry requirements. We advocate for contacting your HEI to see if this stance has changed.

Important points to note

All apprentices will continue to be required to be secure in, and be assessed on, the job-specific English and maths Knowledge and Skills that they need as part of the apprenticeship standard to pass their End Point Assessment (EPA). This is separate to the requirement to gain functional skills and always has been. There is no policy change for the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours (KSBs) needed to pass an apprenticeship standard.

The Department for Education have shared their intention to pay attention to ***Unusual patterns in English and maths provision for apprentices***. This means that if education providers pressurise employers and/or apprentices to stop FSQ study where it is still desired or the education provider stops study without agreement from the other two parties, it will have consequences for that education provider.

How should employers implement this change in practice?

Implementing this change will take time. We suggest that all employers reflect on, and refresh if needed, their current strategy for numeracy and literacy, with each apprentice considered individually. The apprentice's line manager, education/training provider and apprentice must all agree an appropriate plan for securing the occupationally appropriate numeracy and literacy skills for their current and desired future roles. This may, or may not be, the acquisition of an FSQ.

It would be counter-productive to all, to insist that an individual stay in a learning situation that they find overly challenging. Ultimately, they could drop out, which isn't advantageous to anyone. One possible solution is that FSQ study is paused, to be resumed after apprenticeship completion.

For many employers with large cohorts of learners it may not be possible to take every decision before 1st April. In these instances, employers may choose to keep the apprentice in their existing FSQ study until case-by-case decisions can be made. We advocate for discussion on this topic between employers, and within ICB/system apprenticeship strategies, to collectively promote best practice, share expertise, utilise high quality education provision etc.