

ICAEW's Level 7 Accountancy Professional Apprenticeship: Project Report – August 2020



PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report provides feedback on the most recent ICAEW Project Report exam session, with the aim of helping future applicants. Because most of the exam requirements do not change at each session, much of the information is repeated from previous reports – this is because the feedback remains the same.

SUMMARY

There have now been three sessions of the ICAEW's Project Report. The first cohort comprised only 85, the second 493 and the most recent 534 applications. It is anticipated that the number of applications will increase further from 2021 onwards.

Candidates were, again, generally well prepared and addressed the requirements of the exam well.

Consequently, most candidates scored high marks with the average being 78%. There was, however, quite a range of marks with the highest being 100% and the lowest 50%. This range demonstrates that answers can vary significantly in their quality, and that our assessment process is very capable of distinguishing between them. This shows why candidates should not take passing this exam as a formality.

Passing requires thorough preparation and close attention to the exam requirements. Candidates that do not address the exam's requirements properly will score much lower marks than those that do.

Identifying what went well, or could have been improved, is good practice in the world of work. Therefore, it is hoped that candidates will find this exam good practice for the self-evaluation of their work that will be expected throughout their career.

General Observations

Candidates generally answered the requirements very well. Pass rates and average marks reflect this. It is assumed that candidates are benefiting from professional tutoring on how best to complete the exam.

Candidates were almost universally good at writing their answers in a way that made it clear what their personal involvement was in each situation, which is a necessary requirement to pass. It is, however, worth re-emphasising the importance of this. If a candidate is not crystal clear what they did in each situation, they will not score very high marks. Describing what *"the firm"* or *"the team"* did is not what is required in this exam. This is an examination of each candidate's experience – therefore, it is essential that this is what is described in the answers.

Selecting a good situation for each answer is also a necessary (but not sufficient) requirement. A minority of candidates lost a lot of marks, at this session, by describing generic rather than specific situations for some of their answers. Describing what *"the firm tends to do"* or what *"their general approach is"* will not satisfy the requirement to describe a situation.

There was generally a good standard of English and grammar used. Marks are available for well-presented answers. Therefore, candidates are advised to have their submissions independently proofread before they are submitted for assessment.

The examiners are not expecting unusual or complex, but instead everyday situations. There is, therefore, no need to 'over emphasize' what candidates did in each situation.

In addition, candidates continue to be strongly advised to:

- Make full **use of the guidance** that can be found at [icaew.com/level7](https://www.icaew.com/level7).
- Make sure they **use the appropriate template** for the session of the exam that they are submitting – noting that some of the questions vary at each session!
- Anonymise their submissions so as to respect client or colleague confidentiality.
- Use different situations for each of their answers, so as to provide examiners with strong evidence of their experience of each of the skills and behaviours being assessed.
- Use the most appropriate examples that they can from their experience. These should be examples drawn from their work experience and should not be trivial in nature.
- Make sure they **answer the right question** (noting that some questions will vary at each session).
- Be clear which of the ethics or professional scepticism questions they are answering, given that candidates should answer just one of these.
- Write about a **specific situation** as opposed to a general or theoretical one.
- **Use sub-headings** to structure their answers. This also aids the marker's assessment of candidates' submissions.
- Get someone to **review their answers** before submitting them for assessment.
- Make sure they talk about **what they did**, throughout their answers.
- Avoid using too much jargon or textbook material.
- Not feel that they need to try and demonstrate their technical prowess, this not being a technical exam.
- Spell-check their submissions.
- Make sure they don't simply 'cut and paste' text from their training records. It is very likely that they will need to tailor the information to the specific requirements of each question.
- Put the right information under each sub-heading of their answers.
- Make sure they anonymise their answers i.e. do not refer to client's or individual's names.
- Read the 'top tips' at [icaew.com/level7](https://www.icaew.com/level7) and apply them!

Structuring answers

There is quite a lot of supporting information available at [icaew.com/level7](https://www.icaew.com/level7) which candidates are strongly encouraged to read. This includes a webinar from the lead examiner, which suggests that candidates structure their answers around the components of each question using sub-headings. This approach should make it easier to cover each of the requirements and also makes it more straightforward for markers to assess candidates' answers.

Possible subheadings could be (for Question 1a 'Continuous Improvement'):

Description of the situation
How I demonstrated Continuous Improvement
Evaluation of my effectiveness
Description of the lessons that I learnt

If candidates do use subheadings to structure their answers, they are advised to make sure that each subsection of their answers do properly relate to the subheadings. At this session there were several answers which included subheadings where the text of the answers did not correlate well to the subheadings. This detracted from the quality of these answers and in some instances led to lower marks being awarded.

How submissions are marked

Markers will assess each candidate's submission against five sub-requirements, namely:

1. How well candidates have described what they did in the situation (referred to as **personal involvement**);
2. How well candidates have described a specific situation (referred to as the **situation**);
3. How well candidates have described what they did to evidence competence in the specific skill or behaviour (referred to as the **competence**);
4. How well candidates have described how they evaluated the outcome of their work in the specific situation (referred to as the **evaluation**);
5. How well candidates have described what lessons they have learnt (referred to as **lessons learnt**).

If candidates structure their answers to address each of these 'sub-requirements', it should help create an answer that addresses each of the requirements. A good way to do this is by the use of sub-headings. The first sub-requirement, however, pervades everything that a candidate writes so it is not recommended that a separate section of an answer is submitted for this.

Based on how each of these five sub-requirements are individually scored, a final mark is derived for each question using a sophisticated rules-based system.

Candidates should be aware that the first two 'sub-requirements' are of such importance that poor scores on these will limit their ability to score well overall, irrespective of how good the rest of their answer is.

Specific observations about the separate parts of each question

Situation

The descriptions of the situations were often a little too brief. Whilst examiners do not want long descriptions, an extra sentence would often have been helpful to properly understand the scenarios.

This sub-requirement refers to "*action*". This should be interpreted as "*what did you do which demonstrated the skill/behaviour?*".

Situations should be of an appropriate level for a newly qualifying accountant. A few situations were trivial (e.g. having a coffee with a client) and did not, therefore, score highly.

Candidates should make sure that they describe a specific situation that they experienced, as opposed to a generic approach that tends to be applied at work. For example, discussing the firm's general approach to ethics will not score as highly as describing the application of an ethical approach to a specific situation.

Skill or Behaviour

It is important that answers are specific to a situation as opposed to being written in a general way. Candidates should describe a specific situation that they experienced, as opposed to a generic approach that tends to be applied at work.

Evaluation

Candidates are reminded that as well as discussing what could have gone better, it is also appropriate to note what went well. Noting what went well, and could therefore be repeated in a similar situation, could very well be a valid thing for a candidate to write about.

Furthermore, the evaluation should not just describe what happened, but should be a description of the candidate 'stepping back' to consider what went well and what could have gone better.

The best answers tended to cover both the things that went well and the things that could have gone better.

Lessons Learnt

Some of the lessons learnt were too general. It would often have been better if they had been written in a way that was more specific and more related to the situation. A good way to identify useful learnings from a situation could be for candidates to ask for feedback from a colleague.

Even if things went mainly well, candidates should be able to identify something to apply in a similar situation in the future. For example, *“things went so well that I shared my experience with colleagues by way of a report so that they could also benefit from my experience”*.

There continues to be a bit of confusion by candidates as to what is meant by an evaluation and lessons learnt. There is clearly a relationship between these two - however, they are quite different. To illustrate this, consider when a project finishes. Good practice would be to write down all the things that went well, and all the things that could have been improved. The next activity would then be to decide which of these were the most important.

In terms of lessons learnt, it would be likely that you would strive to do something to address the most important things that went badly with an improvement plan whilst retaining the most important things that went well.

It could even be the case that a lesson learnt could be a synthesis of both what went well and what could have been improved. For example, in implementing a new accounting software package we might observe in evaluating the project that costs overran and that it took longer than anticipated to train the users. We might also have observed that our most experienced users of the software quickly identified short-cuts to using it. A lesson learnt could be to involve experienced users in the training of future roll-outs of the software as they would be better at explaining how to make best use of the software than external trainers.

Candidates should also describe their thought process for how they arrived at their 'lessons learnt', (this is a vital aspect of the whole experience of an apprentice) rather than assume that it is 'self-evident' from what they have previously written.

Feedback on specific questions from this session

Q1a – Continuous Improvement

Candidates are strongly advised to refer to how this behaviour is defined in this exam, as opposed to interpreting that meaning, themselves. The definition is: *“Take responsibility for their own professional development by seeking out opportunities that enhance their knowledge, skills and experience”*. Therefore, to answer this question well candidates are advised to focus on situations where they did things to improve their skills or way of doing things. Examples are given in the published guidance notes.

Q1b – Building Relationships

Candidates are advised to read the example situations in the published guidance document.

Q2 (i) – Ethics & Integrity

Poor answers tended to describe generic approaches to ethics and integrity – for example *“My firms approach to ethics is...”*. To answer this question well, candidates should describe a specific situation that they had to deal with.

Q2 (ii) – Professional scepticism

Candidates should demonstrate how they applied their own scepticism, as opposed to writing about fulfilling a task to satisfy a manager or someone else's professional scepticism

Q3 – Problem Solving & Decision Making

The majority of candidates were able to explain actions that they had carried out that demonstrated problem solving and decision making. This is encouraging as these are key skills of accounting professionals. Examples of problem solving covered a range of activities, the most common being technical research and dealing with constraints.

Q4 – Adds Value

This question was generally answered well. Candidates described a wide-range of activities that benefited either their firm or a client. It is encouraging to see how candidates have been able to make genuine improvements in carrying out their work assignments.