ICAEW's Level 4 Apprenticeship, Portfolio & Reflective Statement Examiners' Report – March 2025

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report provides feedback on the most recent ICAEW Portfolio & Reflective Statement exam session (March 2025), with the aim of helping future applicants better prepare their submissions. Because the exam's requirements do not change at each session, much of the information is repeated from previous reports – this is because the feedback remains similar. By including previous feedback, the intention is to provide a comprehensive standalone document.

We will publish a report for this exam, from time-to-time but not after each session. This recognises that the points of interest and potential lessons learnt do not significantly vary over time.

SUMMARY

630 candidates have now submitted a Portfolio & Reflective Statement since the ICAEW exam was launched in 2017, spanning twenty three sessions. This short report sets out some observations from the team who mark this exam.

As we have reported previously, the vast majority of candidates continue to pass the exam comfortably – which is gratifying. It is assumed that candidates are benefiting from professional tutoring on how best to complete the exam. Tutor firms are to be congratulated for their contribution in preparing candidates for the exam. However, candidates can and do fail.

One of the most frequent reasons for a candidate to fail is that they have been found to have plagiarised aspects of their application from previous, current or example submissions. The ICAEW has sophisticated tools for detecting this form of cheating. The consequences of being caught can be very serious. Therefore, candidates are reminded not to do this.

In addition, candidates are reminded that it is strictly forbidden for them to use AI tools (such as ChatGPT) to prepare any parts of their applications. This practice is also considered to be a form of cheating, which will not be tolerated.

It is clear that generally the requirements of the exam are well understood and that candidates are very capable of addressing them. Therefore, future candidates should be confident that if they apply themselves properly, they will pass the exam comfortably.

At this session, candidates again performed well with an average mark of 77% (compared with an overall average of 83% across all sessions). The highest and lowest marks were 94% and 55% respectively. This range of marks clearly demonstrates that the assessment process will differentiate between strong and weaker answers.

Passing this exam requires thorough preparation and close attention to the requirements – passing should not be considered a formality. At this session the difference between the highest and lowest mark was 39% – this clearly shows that marks can readily be dropped.

The template for this exam was modified after two sessions (in 2018). Even though this change happened nearly 7 years ago, at this session for some curious reason several candidates again used the old template for their submissions. The old template had four different questions in Section 1 of the exam. These candidates lost a number of marks (a maximum of 8). Candidates are strongly reminded to only use the latest version of the exam template.

OBSERVATIONS ON SECTION 1 (PORTFOLIO)

Section 1 is an assessment of candidate's portfolio of work through seventeen questions that require concise answers from candidates. Candidates should draw on their experience, as documented in their training logs.

Most candidates were successful in writing their answers to this part of the exam concisely. One or two well written sentences should be sufficient to pass each part of the 17 requirements.

Candidates again averaged higher marks for Section 1 than for Section 2 (the Reflective Statement) - the average marks being 89% and 69% respectively. This pattern of scoring has been consistent throughout all cohorts, to date. This may suggest that candidates are less able to develop the fuller answers that are required in the Reflective Statement, which may reflect the stage that they are at in their professional development.

The work situations were generally well described but candidates are reminded to keep these descriptions clear, concise and of a specific individual situation.

Competence of the knowledge, skill or behaviours were generally well demonstrated. However, candidates should keep their descriptions focused on how the specific knowledge/skill/behaviour is evidenced.

OBSERVATIONS ON SECTION 2 (THE REFLECTIVE STATEMENT)

Section 2 of the exam requires candidates to choose four of the skills or behaviours and describe them in more detail. In order to help structure their answers, Section 2 of the assessment template comprises a number of text boxes for candidates to complete.

Candidates once again generally performed well on this section. However, there were a few instances of 'generic' descriptions of situations – as was the case in Section 1. Generic situations will result in low marks.

Candidates are reminded to clearly describe what they did, in each situation. This exam is seeking evidence of what each candidate has done – not what "their firm", "their team" or "their colleague" did. Lack of evidence of the personal involvement of candidates will result in low marks.

In addition, candidates are reminded to provide the right evidence in the appropriate part of the template. There is no cross-marking in this exam. Therefore, if a candidate provides evidence in the wrong part of the template they will not be given credit for it.

Candidates are again advised to use different situations for each of their answers, so as to provide examiners with evidence of the depth of their experience.

Candidates can choose which of the twelve skills or behaviours to provide answers for in Part 2 of the exam. Whilst this may seem obvious, candidates are strongly encouraged to select the four skills or behaviours that they are able to answer the best.

Generally, there was good evidence of personal involvement and clear descriptions of situations in the answers to this part of the exam, at this session.

Candidates are reminded to only describe a single situation for each answer. In addition, it is important that that details are entered in the correct section of the provided template.

Candidates are encouraged to give concise but clear descriptions of what they "Learnt/Would Do Differently", ideally covering at least two different points.

Finally, candidates should remember that marks are available for a well-written and presented submission. Therefore, they are encouraged to re-read their work before they finalise their submissions to remove any grammatical or clarity issues.

Situation

In selecting a situation to use, candidates are reminded that it should be one that relates closely to the skill or behaviour that they have chosen to answer. For example, if a candidate chooses to answer the communications question, they should select a situation that relates to this.

The descriptions of the situations are often a little too brief – an extra sentence is likely to greatly enhance some answers. Candidates should use just one situation for each answer. Using more than one situation to answer a particular question is likely to provide insufficient depth of evidence to score good marks – this should be avoided.

Skill or Behaviour

Candidates should 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 that they were involved in.

What was learnt / would do differently

Answers should be written in a way that is specific and clearly related to the situation. A good way to identify useful learnings from a particular situation could be to ask for feedback from a colleague, and to describe this feedback in the answers.

Candidates are reminded that as well as discussing what could have gone better, it is also worthwhile noting what went well in a particular situation. Recognising what went well, and could be potentially repeated in a similar situation, is a perfectly valid 'lesson learnt'.