

What is ACE?

ACE stands for 'Assuring Competence in Engineering Construction'.

The aim of the ACE scheme is to provide proof of competence for the whole UK onshore, site-based engineering construction workforce by the end of 2009.

Who is asking for proof of competence, and why?

The UK's health and safety authorities are demanding that clients and employers demonstrate that everyone working for them is competent to perform the tasks they are employed to perform. This is because of concerns that asking someone to perform a task beyond their competence will create a potential risk to that person's safety and the safety of others.

ACE is the UK engineering construction industry's answer to these concerns. In time, compliance with ACE is likely to become a key client requirement for contractors and employees who wish to work on engineering construction sites.

I have demonstrated my competence sufficiently over many years – why do I need to do this again through ACE?

For health and safety reasons it is important that the clients and employers have a documented process to demonstrate that an employee remains fully competent – i.e. that they have kept their skills up to date with modern standards, and that they continue to demonstrate the good principles required in the role.

When do ACE assessments begin?

After a slow start, ACE is now under way. Craftsmen are currently being registered for ACE, taking the assessment and collecting their ACE cards.

Which occupations are covered/ not covered?

Currently, ACE assessments are available for craftsmen, advanced craftsmen and skilled working chargehands in the following occupations:

- Welding
- Plating
- Erecting
- Mechanical Fitting
- Pipefitting
- Riggers.

ACE is currently tackling the question of how to incorporate other occupations (e.g. thermal insulators, scaffolders, electricians, maintenance technicians, etc.), including the possible recognition of other sectors' competence assurance systems. We will circulate details of the approach ACE decides to take once this information becomes available.

How is competence assessed?

The ACE assessment process has been designed to keep disruption of normal working to a minimum. Various methods are used, including observation at the workplace, witness evidence from colleagues and a short 'question-and-answer' session with the assessor. Paperwork will be the assessor's responsibility. Candidates are entitled to receive full pay, benefits and allowances for any time spent away from work in the course of an ACE assessment.

Candidates' performance is assessed against the national occupational standard for the relevant occupation. This is an independent, objective standard set by the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board (ECITB), in consultation with clients, employers and trade unions. Candidates who meet the standard will also qualify for a 'Level 3' NVQ (in England and Wales) or SVQ (in Scotland).

In addition to core trade skills, ACE can also provide recognition of an individual's supplementary competences through 'unit accreditation' of each additional VQ unit.

Who carries out the assessment?

The assessor can be a manager, supervisor, experienced craftsman or someone from outside the company (e.g. employed by a local approved centre). The key requirements are that the assessor must have undergone VQ assessment training and be personally competent in the occupation that he or she is assessing.

What do I receive at the end of the assessment?

You will receive, free of charge, an ACE card as proof of your competence, plus a nationally recognised qualification.

What if I change employers before the assessment is completed?

The ECITB keeps a record of the VQ units you have completed, allowing you and your new employer to pick up again where you left off.

What if I fail part of the assessment?

The national occupational standard is intended to match the minimum standard that the industry already requires, and so failures should be rare. However, in the event that you do not fulfil the requirements of a particular VQ unit, you can continue to collect evidence to support that unit until you are able to complete it. The company may decide to assist this through additional training on the job, opportunities to demonstrate competence in an environment away from the workplace, or by the provision of additional training through the industry's National Skills Development Scheme (NSDS).

I already have a VQ 'Level 3' qualification – what should I do?

If you already have a VQ 'Level 3' qualification issued by the ECITB in one of the occupations currently covered by ACE, you will qualify for an ACE card automatically.

You can download the ACE card application form from the ACE website (www.ace.uk.net). Alternatively, you can ask the ECITB to post the form to you (Tel: 01923 260000).

How long will my ACE card be valid for?

The ACE card is valid for an initial period of 5 years. We will circulate details of the renewal system once this information becomes available.

Who supports ACE?

ACE has the support of the industry's employers, trade unions and clients, all of whom have been involved in developing, managing and promoting the scheme. Craftsmen and managers who have already taken part in ACE assessments have also given the scheme a 'thumbs-up'. Comments have included:

"I found the exercise to be like a refresher."

"It brought back a number of aspects of the job, especially health and safety."

"It didn't take the candidates away from their normal working day or duties."

"The assessment documentation is really easy to use. It makes the job easier for the VQ assessor, and for the candidate."

"If the assessor takes the strain, that's OK by me."

"The system is the future of our industry. You are assessed on the national occupational standards."

"The ACE card will be an endorsement of our competence."

How can I find out more?

Further information is available from the ACE website (www.ace.uk.net), the ECITB (Tel: 01923 260000) or by contacting the relevant person in your company.