

Best Practices of Classification and Assessment

by Edward J. Latessa*

The Evolution of Classification

For the purposes of this article, "risk" refers to the probability that an offender will reoffend. Thus, high-risk offenders have a greater probability of reoffending than do low-risk offenders. How offender risk is determined is, thus, very important, because it can affect public protection and the way and manner in which offenders are supervised in—or whether they are even released into—the community.

"Gut Feelings." The prehistory of risk assessment in criminal justice refers to the use of "gut feelings" to make decisions about the risk an offender presents. With this process, information is collected about the offender, usually through an interview or file review. The information is then reviewed and a general assessment or global prediction is made: "In my professional opinion. . ." The problems with this method are considerable and have been delineated by Wong (1997) and Kennedy (1998), who find that:

- Predictions are subject to personal bias;
- Predictions are subjective and often unsubstantiated;
- Decision rules are not observed;
- The process can lead to bias decisions;
- It is difficult to distinguish levels of risk; and
- Information is overlooked or overemphasized.

The First Generation of Classification: The "Burgess Scale." The first generation of formal classification instruments was pioneered by Bruce et al. in 1928. The development of this standardized and objective instrument was brought about by the request of the Illinois Parole Board, which wanted to make more informed decisions about whom to release on parole. Bruce and his colleagues reviewed the records of nearly 6,000 inmates. The so-called "Burgess scale" included items such as criminal type (first timer, occasional, habitual, profession-

al), social type (farm boy, gangster, hobo, ne'er-do well, drunkard), age when paroled, and other static factors. Although many of these categories seem out-of-date today, the Burgess scale was one of the first attempts to develop an actuarial instrument to predict offender risk. There are several advantages and disadvantages to this approach (Kennedy, 1998; Wong, 1997). The advantages are that the categories:

- Are objective and accountable;
- Cover important historical risk factors;
- Are easy to use and are reliable; and
- Distinguish levels of risk of reoffending.

The disadvantages are that they:

- Consist primarily of static predictors;
- Do not identify target behaviors; and
- Are not capable of measuring change in the offender.

The Second Generation of Classification: The CMC. The second generation of risk prediction recognized that risk is more than simply static predictors. The best example can be seen in the Wisconsin Client Management Classification System. First developed and used in Wisconsin in 1975, the Client Management Classification System (CMC) is designed to help identify the level of surveillance needed for each case, as well as to determine the needs of the offender and the resources necessary to meet them. With adequate classification, limited resources can be concentrated on the most critical cases—those of high risk (Wright et al., 1984). Following Wisconsin's development of the CMC, the National Institute of Corrections (1983) adopted it as a model system and began advocating and supporting its use throughout the country. It has been proven satisfactory in many jurisdic-

tions, including Austin, Texas (Harris, 1994).

The foundation of the system is a risk/needs assessment instrument that is completed for each probationer at regular intervals. Cases are classified into high, medium, or low risk/needs. These ratings are, in turn, used to determine the level of supervision required for each case.

Once an offender is classified into a risk/needs level, a profiling interview makes a more detailed assessment that helps to determine what the relationship should be between the officer and the offender. This element of the system is called the Client Management Classification System, and it

The CMC component is time consuming to administer and the scoring is somewhat involved. In practice, many probation departments that use this instrument rely more heavily on the risk component, which consists of mainly static predictors.

consists of four unique treatment modalities:

- **Selective Intervention.** This group is designed for offenders who enjoy relatively stable and prosocial lifestyles (e.g., employed, established in community, and minimal criminal records). Such offenders have typically experienced an isolated and stressful event or neurotic problem. With effective intervention, there is a higher chance of avoiding future difficulty. The goals of treatment for these individuals include the development of appropriate responses to temporary crises and problems and the reestablishment of pro-life patterns.
- **Environmental Structure.** Offenders in this group are predominantly characterized by deficiencies in social, vocational, and intellectual skills. Most of their problems stem from their inability to succeed in their employment or to be comfortable in most social settings and from their overall lack of social skills and intellectual cultivation/ability. The goals for these persons include: (a) developing

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basic employment and social skills; (b) selecting alternatives to association with criminally oriented peers; and (c) improving social skills and impulse control.

- **Casework Control.** Offenders in this group manifest instabilities in their lives as evidenced by failures in employment and domestic problems. A lack of goal-directedness is present, typically associated with alcohol and drug problems. Offense patterns include numerous arrests, although marketable job skills are present. Unstable childhoods, family pressure, and financial difficulties are typically present. The goals appropriate for offenders in this group include promoting stability in their professional and domestic endeavors and achieving an improved utilization of the individual's potential, along with an elimination of self-defeating behavior and emotional/psychological problems.

- **Limit Setting.** Offenders in this group are commonly considered to be successful career criminals because of their long-term involvement in criminal activities. They generally enjoy "beating the system"; they frequently act for material gain; and they show little remorse or guilt. Because of their value system, they easily adapt to prison environments and return to crime upon release. Goals for this group are problematic, but they include changing the offender's basic attitudes and closely supervising his or her behavior within the community.

The information for the CMC is based on a structured interview with the offender. After a case has been classified, an individual treatment plan is developed. Results from the CMC have found that approximately 40% of probation caseloads are assigned to Selective Intervention, 15% to Environmental Structure, 30% to Casework Control, and 15% to Limit Setting.

Despite the advantages of the CMC, there are several shortcomings. One is that risk and needs are separately assessed and not fully integrated. Another is that the CMC component is time consuming to administer and the scoring is somewhat involved. In practice, many probation departments that use this instrument rely more heavily on the risk component, which consists of mainly static predictors.

Recent Classification Instruments: The LSI-R. The latest generation of classification instruments has successfully combined risk and needs and is relatively easy to use. One example is the Level of Service

A leading advantage of actuarial risk and need assessment tools is that they are standardized and objective and help distinguish levels of risk or need. Because they are based on statistical studies, they also reduce bias and false positive and false negative rates.

Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) designed by Andrews and Bonta (1995). The LSI-R is based on social learning theory and has been extensively tested and validated across North America. The LSI-R consists of 54 items in 10 areas. These areas are:

- Criminal history;
- Education and employment;
- Financial;
- Family and marital;
- Accommodation;
- Leisure/Recreation;
- Companions;

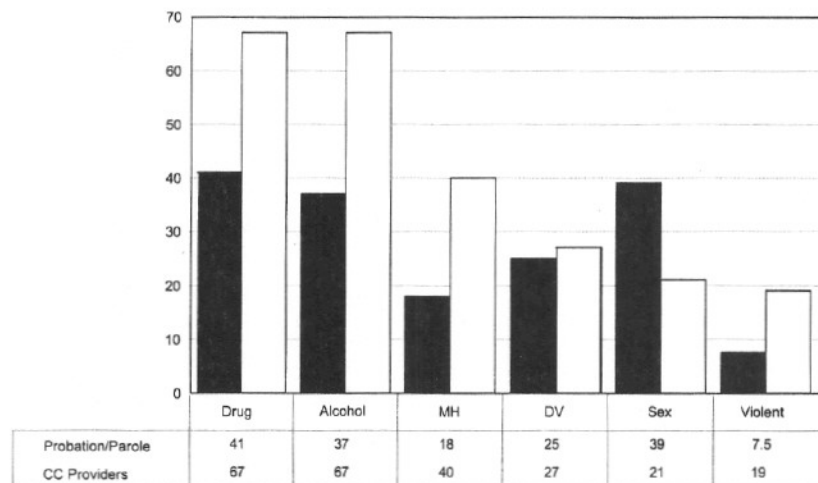
- Alcohol/Drug Problem;
- Emotional/Personal; and
- Attitudes/Orientation.

Information is collected primarily through a structured interview process. The LSI-R has been found to be one of the most valid instruments for predicting recidivism. For example, a recent study compared the LSI-R to the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), an actuarial instrument developed by Hare (1996) and widely used in the United States and Canada to classify and assess psychopaths. Gendreau and his colleagues (2001) found that the LSI-R surpassed the PLC-R in its ability to predict both general recidivism ($r = 0.38$ vs. 0.23) and violent recidivism ($r = 0.26$ vs. 0.22). There is also a juvenile version of the LSI-R called the Youthful Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (Y-LSI; Hoge & Andrews, 1996).

Specialized Classification Systems: The OPI. There are also classification systems designed for certain types of offenders or need areas, such as the mentally disordered, sex offenders, or substance abusers. Some of these systems help to classify cases and recommend levels of intervention. One example of the latter is the Offender Profile Index (OPI) developed by the National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors (Inciardi et al., 1993). The OPI is a broad classification instrument useful for determining which type of drug abuse treatment intervention is most appropriate.

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Figure 1: Use of Specialized Assessment Tools by Probation, Parole, and Community Corrections Service Providers



Source: D. Hubbard, L.F. Travis & E.J. Latessa, 2001. Case Classification in Community Corrections: A National Survey of the State of the Art.

Five profiles are produced by the OPI:

- Long-term residential treatment;
- Short-term residential treatment;
- Intensive outpatient treatment;
- Regular outpatient treatment; and
- Urine monitoring only.

The OPI is not designed to replace more comprehensive and clinically oriented treatment plans and case studies. However, for probation and parole agencies with large numbers of cases, the OPI can be a valuable tool in case management and appropriate treatment referral. Figure 1 shows the use of specialized assessment tools across the United States.

Advantages, Criticisms, and Use of Assessment Tools

Advantages of Assessment Tools.

One of the leading advantages of actuarial risk and need assessment tools is that they are standardized and objective and help distinguish levels of risk or need (e.g. high, medium, low). Because they are based on statistical studies, they also reduce bias and false positive and false negative rates (Holsinger et al., 2001). In a recent study of sex offender assessment, several actuarial instruments were compared to clinical assessment (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998). Several different outcome measures were examined, and as is apparent in Figure 2, when pitted against the best actuarial tool, clinical assessment fell short in terms of predictive ability. As can be seen, the differences are not even close.

In a recent national survey of probation and parole agencies concerning the use and practices surrounding class classification, Hubbard et al. (2001) found that the vast majority of agencies reported using some actuarial instrument to assess and classify offenders. A summary of their findings is presented below:

- Almost 75% of the probation and parole agencies and about 56% of the community corrections service providers reported that they classify using standardized and objective instruments;
- Large agencies were more likely to classify than small agencies;
- More than 83% of the respondents reported that it was "absolutely" or "very necessary" to classify on risk, and 66% reported it was necessary to classify on needs;
- The most widely used instrument was the Wisconsin Risk and Need instrument, followed by the LSI-R.

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- Nearly all respondents agreed that case classification makes their job easier, benefits the offender, creates a more professional environment, helps staff make better decisions, increases effectiveness of service delivery, and enhances fairness in decision-making;
- The most common use of these tools was to address officer workloads (75%), staff deployment (54%), development of specialized caseloads (47%), and sentencing decisions (20%);
- Nearly 80% of the agencies reported using the various instruments to reassess offenders.

Criticisms of Assessment Tools.

Offender classification is not without its critics. Some argue that the instruments are nothing more than "educated guesses" (Smykla,

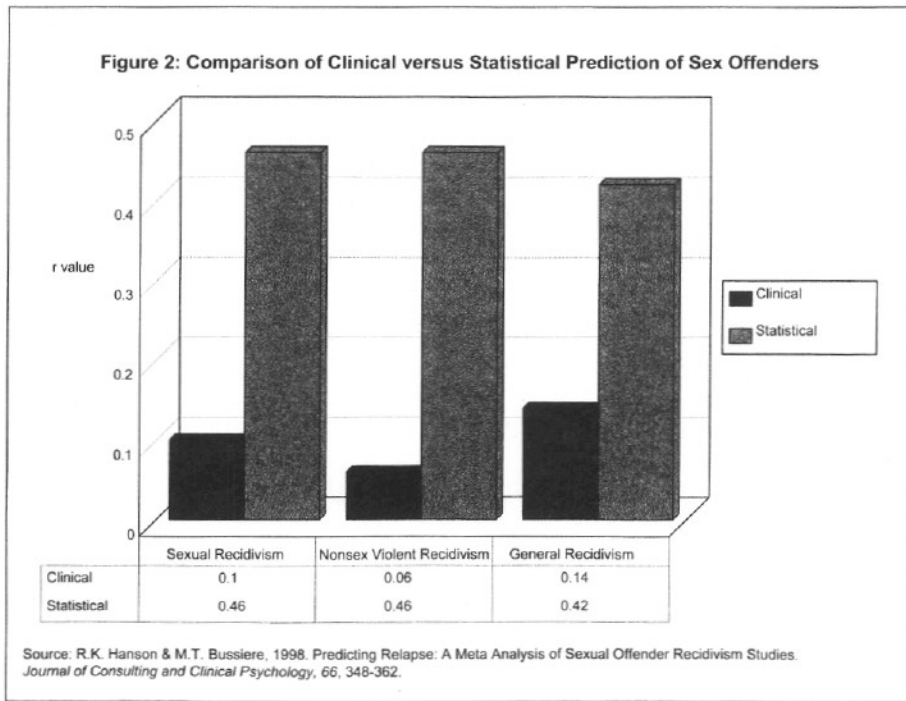
1986); others are more concerned about their proper use and accuracy (Greenwood & Zimring, 1985; Silver & Miller, 2001; Wilbanks, 1985). Another leading concern centers on the use of a risk instrument in one jurisdiction that has been developed and validated in another. Just because a risk instrument is accurate in one jurisdiction does not necessarily mean it will be effective in predicting outcome in another (Collins, 1990; Kratcoski, 1985; Sigler & Williams, 1994; Wright et al., 1984). As Travis (1989) has stated: "Ideally, a risk classification device should be constructed based on the population on which it is to be used."

The Use of Assessment Tools. Clear (1988) maintains that the implementation of these prediction instruments has two main advantages: First, they improve the reliability of decisions made about offenders; in a sense, they make correctional officials more predictable. Second, they provide a basis on which corrections personnel can publicly justify both individual decisions and decision-making policies. In both cases, the advantage is grounded in the powerful appearance of "scientific" decision-making.

There are a number of reasons that the classification and assessment of offenders are important. Among these are that they help to:

- Guide and structure decision-making;
- Reduce bias;
- Improve the placement of offenders for treatment and public safety;

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- Manage offenders in a more effective manner;
- Mount legal challenges; and
- Utilize resources more effectively.

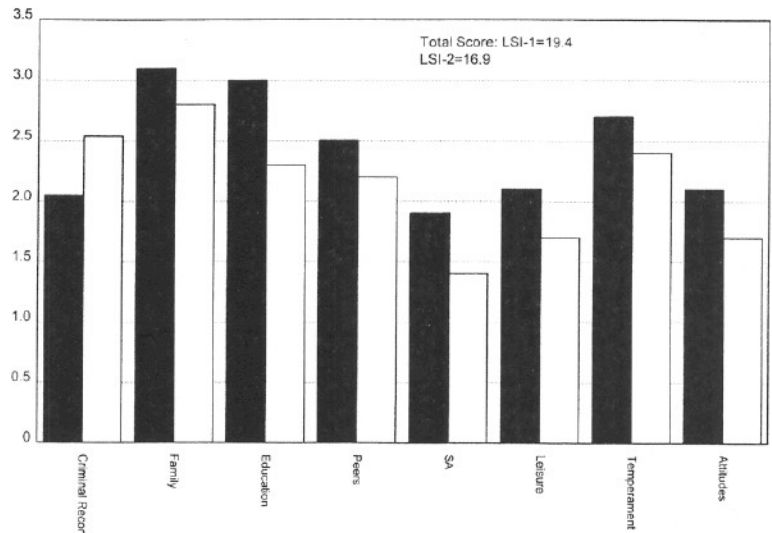
In addition to the above, another advantage of using assessment tools based on dynamic factors is the ability to reassess the offender and to determine whether or not there has been a reduction in risk score. This allows an agency to move beyond risk management to risk reduction—the ultimate goal of community corrections. Figure 3 illustrates the initial assessment and reassessment scores from a sample of youth supervised on probation. As can be seen, these data can help a probation department better focus its resources and strategies.

Another advantage of using assessment tools based on dynamic factors is the ability to reassess the offender and to determine whether or not there has been a reduction in risk score.

Another example is demonstrated in Figure 4, which shows the results from the reassessment of offenders sentenced to an Ohio community-based correctional facility. The purpose of such a facility is to provide up to six months of secure, structured treatment to felony offenders who would otherwise be incarcerated in a prison.

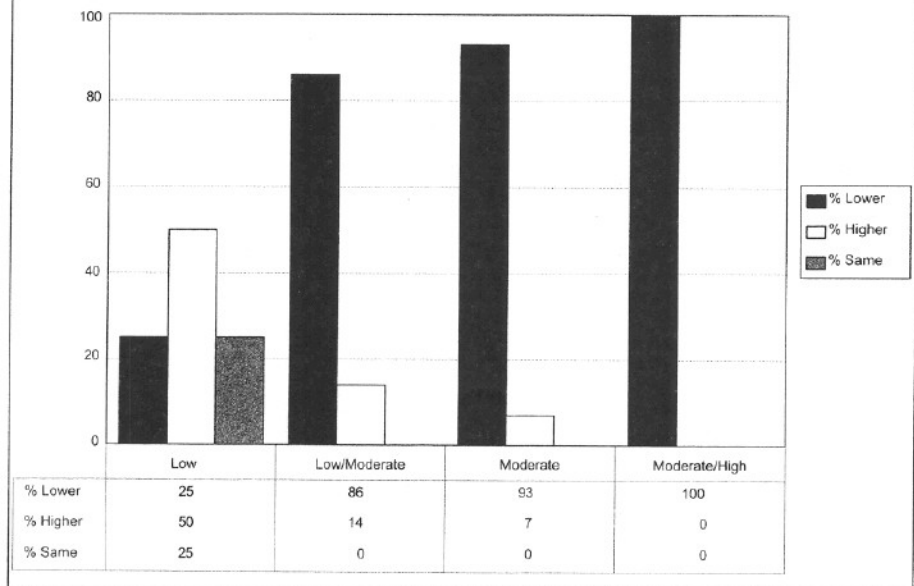
The results from the Ohio study show that the greatest reduction in risk scores was for the highest-risk offenders, whereas low-risk offenders actually saw their risk scores increase. These data demonstrate the risk principle, which states that intensive treatment services should be reserved for high-risk offenders. When low-risk offenders are placed in an intensive intervention program, the outcome is often detrimental to them. This occurs for two reasons. The first may be that the high-risk offenders have a negative influence on the low-risk, more prosocial individuals. The second probably results from the disruption of prosocial networks and other social support mechanisms that low-risk offenders usually possess (or they

Figure 3: Assessment and Reassessment Risk/Need Scores From 84 Youth Based on the Youthful Level of Service Inventory



Source: Based on a study conducted by C. Taylor & E. Latessa, 2001.

Figure 4: LSI Risk Reduction by Group for Ohio Community Correctional Facilities



would not be low risk). For example, placement in a program such as the one described above usually results in loss of employment and disruption to the family.

Principles of Offender Classification

Andrews et al. (1990) have identified four principles of effective classification:

- **Risk:** Predicting future criminal behavior and matching levels of treatment/services to the risk level of the offender;
- **Need:** Matching offenders to programs that address their criminogenic needs;

- **Responsivity:** Delivering intervention in a style and mode that is consistent with the ability and learning style of the offender and recognizing that individuals may be more responsive to certain staff; and
- **Professional discretion:** Having considered risk, need, and responsivity, making decisions as are appropriate under existing conditions.

Through the work of a number of researchers, our understanding of classifica-

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tion and assessment, and of the important role it plays in community corrections, is becoming more apparent (Andrews, 1983, 1989; Bonta & Montiuk, 1985; Gendreau et al., 1996; Jones, 1996; Kennedy & Serin, 1997).

The latest generation of classification instruments provides the probation or parole department with an effective and fairly simple means of classifying and managing offenders. It is important to remember, however, that although instruments such as the CMC or LSI-R can be important and useful tools in assisting the community correctional agency and the supervising officer in case management, they will not solve all of the problems faced by probation and parole agencies, and they will not fully replace the sound judgment and experience of well-trained probation and parole officers (Klein, 1989; Schumacher, 1985).

Standards of Classification

Travis and Latessa (1996) have identified 10 elements of effective classification and assessment. They are:

- **Purpose.** Generally, the purpose of classification and assessment is to insure that offenders are treated differentially within a system so as to insure safety, adequate treatment, and understanding.
- **Organizational fit.** Organizations and agencies have different characteristics, capabilities, and needs.
- **Accuracy.** How well does the instrument correctly assess outcome? Is the offender correctly placed within the system? Reliability and validity are the key elements to accuracy. Glick et al. (1998, p. 73) explain reliability and validity "as hitting the same spot on a bull's eye all the time. If your system is reliable but not valid, you may be hitting the target consistently, but not the right spot."
- **Parsimony.** Parsimony refers to the ease of use, the economy of composition, and the achievement of accuracy with the least number of factors. In other words, short and simple.
- **Distribution.** How well does the system disperse cases across classification groups? If all offenders fall into the same group, there is little distribution.
- **Dynamism.** Dynamism is the instrument measuring dynamic risk factors that are amenable to change. Dynamic factors also allow for the measurement of progress and change in the offender and aid in reclassification.

- **Utility.** To be effective, classification systems must be useful. This means that the staff achieve the purposes of classification and the goals of the agency.
- **Practicality.** Closely related to utility is the practical aspect of classification. The system must be practical and possible to implement. A process that is 100% accurate but impossible to apply in an agency does not help that agency. Similarly, a system that is easy to use but does not lead to better decisions is of no value.
- **Justice.** An effective classification and assessment process should produce just outcomes. Offender placement and service provision should be based upon offender differences that are real and

- The risk factors may be similar for females and males, but exposure to these factors may present different challenges for female and male offenders (Chesney-Lind, 1989; Funk, 1999; Gilligan & Wiggins, 1988).]

There is no question that there has been considerably less research conducted on female offenders than on male offenders. However, several studies that have examined risk factors and gender have found that instruments such as the LSI-R can be useful in assessing and classifying female offenders (Andrews, 1982; Bonta & Motiuk, 1985; Coulson et al., 1996; Hoge & Andrews, 1996; Motiuk, 1993; Shields & Simourd, 1991). In a recent study examining risk prediction for male and female offenders,

Although the debate will likely continue, it appears that instruments such as the LSI-R can indeed be used to assess and classify both male and female offenders.

measurable and should yield consistent outcomes, regardless of subjective impressions.

- **Sensitivity.** Sensitivity is really a goal of the classification process. If all elements are met, the most effective classification and assessment process is sensitive to the differences of offenders. At the highest level, this would mean individualizing case planning.

Classification and Female Offenders

Several scholars have questioned the notion that the risk factors used to predict antisocial behavior for male offenders are similar to those needed for female offenders (Chesney-Lind, 1989, 1997; Funk, 1999; Mazerolle, 1998). The neglect of female offenders has consistently been criticized in areas of criminological and criminal justice research ranging from theory development to the development of correctional interventions (Belknap & Holsinger, 1998; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992; Funk, 1999). Furthermore, the lack of instruments that discriminate between males and females has been a common criticism of current risk/needs assessment efforts (Funk, 1999). The basis for this criticism is twofold:

- The factors involved in risk assessment for females may differ from those for males; and

Lowenkamp et al. (2001) added to this research by looking at 317 males and 125 females. They found that the LSI-R was a valid predictive instrument for female offenders. They also found that a history of prior abuse (sexual or physical), although more prevalent in female offenders, was not correlated with outcome. Although the debate will likely continue, it appears that the evidence is mounting that instruments such as the LSI-R can indeed be used to assess and classify both male and female offenders.

Conclusions

In conclusion, several points can be made with regard to offender assessment:

- **First**, there is not a "one size fits all" strategy for offender assessment. Once a general risk/needs assessment has been completed, it is often necessary to conduct secondary assessments on specific target areas (i.e., substance abuse or mental health).
- **Second**, assessment is not a "one-time" event. Offender risk and need factors change, and it is thus important to consider assessment as a process rather than an event. Reassessing offenders helps promote public safety.
- **Third**, offender assessments based on standardized and objective factors are more reliable, easier to use, less time consuming, and less expensive than clinical approaches.

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- **Fourth**, staff training is vital if assessment is going to achieve its full potential. Along with training is the importance of quality assurance mechanisms to monitor the use and application of assessment tools and processes.

Finally, it is important to remember that assessment involves making decisions. Although instruments give guidance and information, it is people who decide what to do.

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