



The Improvement Practitioner is being defunded

New starts on the Improvement Practitioner (ST0192) are losing government funding. Apprentices already on programme are fine, new cohorts need an alternative.

The obvious move might seem to be stepping up to the Improvement Specialist (ST0555, Level 5) — and for some employers and apprentices, that will be exactly the right call. But it is worth pausing before making that assumption.

The Specialist is a significantly more demanding standard: it sits at Level 5, typically requires an existing improvement qualification at Level 4 as a starting point, and expects apprentices to be leading the deployment of improvement strategy, managing portfolios of projects and delivering Lean Six Sigma Green Belt training to others; as well as needing specialist statistical software. For employers who want to develop people who are already working at that level, it is a great standard. But for those who were using the Improvement Practitioner to build foundational improvement capability in their workforce, the Specialist may be a bigger jump than it first appears.

The Quality Practitioner is worth a second look

We know the instinct is to dismiss it as "too quality." But the Quality Practitioner (ST0853, Level 4) is built on four pillars — Quality Planning, Quality Assurance, Quality Control, and Continuous Improvement — and that last pillar is assessed directly through a work based project. The standard explicitly references structured problem solving using Define, Measure, Analyse, Improve and Control methodology, data analysis, gap identification and stakeholder management. This is familiar territory.

The standard is broader than the Improvement Practitioner — apprentices also need grounding in auditing, quality management systems and regulatory awareness — and that means some programme development work. But much of it builds naturally on an improvement foundation, and it adds a professional credential: successful completion leads to Chartered Quality Institute recognition at practitioner level.

The project keeps it close to home

Apprentices can base their work-based project on "the application of business improvement tools and techniques to continuously improve the quality of performance of organisational processes and products/services." In other words, a DMAIC improvement project works. The framing shifts, but the underlying work does not have to.

And for apprentices who do choose the improvement project route and use a DMAIC approach, ISSP will continue to award Lean Six Sigma Green Belt membership and certification — just as we have always done for Improvement Practitioner apprentices assessed by us.

How the standards compare:

	Improvement Practitioner (ST0192)	Quality Practitioner (ST0853)	Improvement Specialist (ST0555)
Level	4	4	5
Funding status	Being defunded for new starts	Fully funded	Fully funded
Typical duration	14–18 months	14 months	14–18 months
Typical entry point	No formal improvement qualification required	No formal improvement qualification required	Typically requires an existing Level 4 improvement qualification
Who it is for	People leading smaller improvement projects or supporting larger programmes	People deploying quality practices and driving improvement in their area of responsibility	People leading improvement strategy, managing portfolios of projects and building capability in others
EPA methods	Three: MCQ exam, project report/presentation/Q&A, professional discussion	Two: work based project/presentation/Q&A, professional discussion	Two: case-study examination, professional discussion underpinned by portfolio
Project/portfolio format	A3 report (1–3 sides), written on-programme	4,000-word report, scoped at gateway, written during EPA period	Portfolio of evidence compiled on-programme, including a mandatory delivered training session (video recorded)
EPA period	2 months	6 months	20 weeks
Grades	Fail, Pass, Merit, Distinction	Fail, Pass, Distinction	Fail, Pass, Merit, Distinction
Employer rep at EPA	Required at both assessments	Not required	Technical expert (ideally Master Black Belt level) required at professional discussion

	Improvement Practitioner (ST0192)	Quality Practitioner (ST0853)	Improvement Specialist (ST0555)
Professional recognition	None	Chartered Quality Institute – Practitioner level	None
ISSP Six Sigma Belt award	Green Belt, for DMAIC projects via ISSP	Green Belt, for DMAIC improvement projects via ISSP	Black Belt, for DMAIC projects via ISSP
Key distinctive feature	Improvement project using recognised methodology at the heart of the EPA	Broader quality remit with improvement project option; CQI recognition on completion	Mandatory training delivery; strategic and leadership focus; advanced statistical examination
Best fit for	Developing people in improvement roles who are new to structured methodology	Developing people with a quality or improvement remit who need a funded, credentialed route	Developing experienced improvers who are ready to lead, coach and build organisational capability

We are here to help - If you would like to talk it through, we would love to hear from you: Info@isspro.co.uk