



***FURTHER EDUCATION SUPPORT SERVICE***  
*Seirbhís Tacaíochta don Bhreisoideachas*

FETAC Provider Quality Assurance

Section B9

Self Evaluation of Programmes and Related Services

**The Role of the Self Evaluation  
External Evaluator**

Resource for DES – Funded Providers of FETAC Programmes

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## 1. Introduction

This handbook is aimed at External Evaluators who have been engaged by a Provider as part of their Self Evaluation process of one or more of their programme(s) and related services.

It provides one perspective of the role and activities of the External Evaluator. In addition, it attempts to provide some practical tips on how an External Evaluator might approach their task. The document draws from the practical experiences gained following a number of external evaluations.

All External Evaluators should have an in depth knowledge of the FETAC document *"Policy and Guidelines for Provider Quality Assurance in Further Education and Training."* This is referred to as the FETAC QA guidelines document. Evaluators must be familiar with Section 9 of this document and the associated templates.

Providers may choose to involve the External Evaluator at different stages of the Self Evaluation process. The External Evaluator can work as part of the Provider's Self Evaluation team and in so doing actively contribute to the process as it is being carried out. Alternatively, the External Evaluator may be drafted into the process at the latter stages i.e. post completion of the checklist, Programme Evaluation Report and Programme Improvement Plan. The former approach may involve several visits of an External Evaluator while the latter will, under normal circumstances, involve just one. The involvement of the External Evaluator from an earlier stage of the process may suit situations where a Provider requires the expertise of the evaluator throughout the process.

## 2. Background

In 2007 a Task Group comprising members of the Further Education Support Service (FESS), the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA), the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and Provider representatives met to explore a phased approach to supporting FETAC Provider Quality Assurance: Section B9, Self Evaluation of Programmes and Related Services.

In October 2007, as part of the development of support, the FESS in partnership with the IVEA and Department of Education and Science (DES) held a National Conference on Quality Assurance in Further Education entitled *"Improving Programmes and Services through Self-Evaluation"*.

This was followed by a National Programme of FESS Continuing Professional Development Seminars on Self Evaluation.

The final stage in the phased approach to supporting Providers involved the development of a range of resources (including this resource). All of the resources can be downloaded from the FESS website [www.fess.ie](http://www.fess.ie)

Seminars on Self Evaluation of Programmes and Related Services continue to be offered by FESS each year for DES Providers. Please see [www.fess.ie](http://www.fess.ie) for calendar.

### 3. Context

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 sets out the parameters for conducting a Self Evaluation as follows:

*The procedures ... shall include—*

- (a) the evaluation at regular intervals, and as directed from time to time by the Council of the programme of education and training concerned, including evaluation by persons who are competent to make national and international comparisons in that respect,*
- (b) evaluation by Learners of that programme, and*
- (c) evaluation of services related to that programme and shall provide for the publication in such form and manner as the Council thinks fit of findings arising out of the application of those procedures.*

Each programme offered by a Provider and the services which relate to it, must be evaluated by the Provider with the involvement of Learners and an External Evaluator.

Under the terms and conditions of registration with FETAC Providers are required to undertake a Self Evaluation of a programme within one year of registration. Further Self Evaluations must be implemented at a frequency appropriate to the duration and nature of the Provider's programmes following the first evaluation, as set out in the Provider's policy on Self Evaluation.

### 4. Role of the External Evaluator

#### **Overall**

According to the FETAC QA guidelines document, *"the role of the External Evaluator is to offer objective comparisons with similar programmes available elsewhere. This role of this person should be that of a 'critical friend', i.e. someone who can bring support, recognition and positive suggestions for improvement."*

Self Evaluation of programmes and services is a crucial part of a Provider's quality assurance system and its purpose is ultimately to identify areas for improvement. In this way the quality of service to Learners on the ground can be improved by the Provider over time.

When carrying out an evaluation the Provider should involve, as an external evaluator, a person who is independent of programme delivery and capable of comparing the quality of the programme(s) being evaluated with that of similar programmes elsewhere.

According to FETAC guidelines an evaluator should have:

- education, training or industry expertise in the broad subject area of the programme being evaluated
- experience in national and/or international certification systems
- experience in one or more of the following:
  - Programme Design
  - Programme Delivery
  - Programme Evaluation
  - Cross Moderation of Standards
  - External Verification of Standards
  - Auditing of Quality Systems
  - Centre Accreditation

The External Evaluator is someone who contributes an independent expertise to a Provider's Self Evaluation process. It is through the work of the External Evaluator that Providers can be assured that their own Self Evaluation process is authentic. In other words, the External Evaluator can act as an independent auditor of the evaluation process. As such the evaluator should both verify and evaluate the findings of the Provider. Where appropriate the evaluator may draw on their own expertise and experience to advise Providers of other practices being employed elsewhere in the sector. In so doing evaluators may make recommendations to the Provider on their Self Evaluation methodology as well as aspects of the specific programme under evaluation. The evaluator may also make judgements on the wider quality assurance system and in particular its effectiveness in supporting the programme in reaching its original aims and objectives.

The following questions may be helpful to the External Evaluator in determining his/her role:

- Is the programme meeting its stated objectives and do the related services support this?
- Is there adequate evidence to demonstrate this?
- Is the evidence consistent with the Provider's quality assurance agreement?

### **Activities**

The External Evaluator, through a process of engagement with the Provider, verifies that a Provider has conducted a meaningful Self Evaluation of one or more of its programmes and its related services, in a manner that is consistent with section B9 of their own quality assurance agreement. In other words the External Evaluator 'signs-off' that the deliverables of the Self Evaluation (i.e. Programme Evaluation Report and Programme Improvement Plan) have been completed following a satisfactory process and are ready to be sent to FETAC. The role of the External Evaluator will vary from one Provider context to another. It is expected that the External Evaluator should share their expertise in QA and programme design and delivery etc. The External Evaluator should also offer advice and guidance on the findings of the programme review, and analyse and contribute to the development and improvement of the programme and quality assurance system of the Provider as appropriate.

The External Evaluator should carry out their activities with attention to the following:

**Confidentiality:** all material received and produced in the conduct of the evaluation should be treated as confidential.

**Anonymity:** The focus of the evaluation should be on the programme(s) and related services, and as such it will not be necessary to identify individuals.

**Objectivity:** evaluators should declare any potential conflict of interest they have with any Provider if they feel that their objectivity may be in any way compromised. During the course of the evaluation, comments / statements should be based on evidence and subjective comments should be avoided. Findings should be made based on actual evidence to back them up.

**Deadlines:** the feedback on an evaluation should be provided within an agreed timeframe.

**Positive Approach and Improvement:** Sometimes it is easier to find fault than good practice. Make a conscious effort to find and record good practice as well as things which could be done better. The aim of the evaluation should be to bring about ongoing improvement. Recommendations should be made available to management which could, if implemented, make a positive difference to the programme(s) or services.

**Proportionality:** evaluations for larger contexts may require more time than those for smaller centres. Similarly, multi-location Providers may involve greater effort on the part of the Self Evaluation team including the external evaluator.

The External Evaluator may be guided and informed by the following stages in the evaluation process:

- Engagement/planning the review
- Research and Document Gathering
- Analysis
- Dissemination of Findings
- Sign Off

Each of these stages is described in the sections that follow.

## 5. Engagement

External Evaluators will be typically engaged following an approach either directly from, or on behalf of, the Provider. As part of this engagement process, both the Provider and External Evaluator should agree the terms and conditions of the engagement. Depending on the context, it may be appropriate to draft a contract of employment.

Both the evaluator and Provider should be clear on the nature of the Self Evaluation being carried out. To a great extent this will determine what is expected from the External Evaluator, and in turn how the External Evaluator approaches the work. In many cases the focus of the Self Evaluation will be on the broad area of the QA system and its effectiveness in relation to the programme and service being evaluated. In certain cases however the

concentration may be more technical, and specific details of the programme may be examined.

As part of the initial contacts between the Provider and the External Evaluator, it might also be useful to discuss, and where necessary agree upon, the following aspects of the external evaluation:

- A primary (and backup) contact point for the evaluator to use when requesting information from the Provider
- Preferred method of communication
- A process for the external evaluation (such as that outlined in this document) i.e. milestones and associated timeframe
- It would also make sense to set a target date for sign-off

At the end of the engagement process the External Evaluator will either accept or be unable to accept to undertake the task of acting as External Evaluator for the Provider.

## **6. Research and Document Gathering**

In preparation for site-visits External Evaluators should familiarise themselves with both the Provider and nature and content of the programme(s) being evaluated. A visit to the Provider's web site, if one exists, is recommended. Where possible programme brochures should be obtained, and studied. For more technical evaluations, the module descriptors / award specifications (and where available the validated programme) should be acquired.

In addition to the Provider and programme specific details mentioned above, the External Evaluator should be familiar with the following documents:

- The Provider's quality assurance agreement with FETAC
- The completed Self Evaluation checklist
- The Programme Evaluation Report
- The Programme Improvement Plan
- Any evidence of previous Self-Evaluations – particularly for the same programme(s) and related services.

A summary and/or analysis of the findings of the Learner feedback survey, including the original questionnaire, would also be useful.

The External Evaluator should acknowledge any documentation received from the Provider.

## 7. Analysis

### Analysis - Overview

Before delving into the detailed findings of the Self Evaluation the evaluator should seek to develop an overview of the Self Evaluation process to date.

The following table, which outlines a list of questions along with the rationale for asking them, may serve to provide such clarification:

Question	Rationale
How did the Provider approach the self-evaluation?	The answer to this will give the evaluator a greater insight into how the evaluation was carried out.
What are the Provider's policy and procedures on self-evaluation? Was there a particular evaluation plan?	The evaluator will be in a position to determine whether the current evaluation fits in with the overall plan as outlined in the Provider's QA procedures.
Is this the first evaluation of this programme?	For first time evaluations evaluators need to focus on the fundamental issue of whether the programme is meeting its stated objectives. For subsequent evaluations of programmes evaluators may use the Programme Improvement Plan (and any other documentation) from the previous evaluation(s) as a reference.

### Analysis – Self Evaluation Checklist

In preparation for an on-site visit the External Evaluator should analyse the Provider's completed Self Evaluation checklist. The FETAC Self Evaluation checklist template (available from <http://www.fetac.ie/qa/qa2.htm>) may be used in this regard. The purpose of the analysis is twofold:

In the first instance it is necessary to check that the checklist used by the Provider covers all of the areas referenced in the FETAC checklist template. Any differences might be noted and brought to the attention of the Provider during the on-site visit. It is recognised that for cases where the Provider does not use the FETAC checklist template, this task may become quite cumbersome and even onerous. In any case a mapping is required between the FETAC template and the checklist used by the Provider.

Secondly it is necessary to analyse whether or not the evidence produced during the Self Evaluation and noted in the checklist is consistent with that documented for the corresponding area of the Provider's quality assurance agreement. (In order to do this the checklist must be mapped back to the Provider's QA agreement.) Any inconsistencies should be noted and brought to the attention of the Provider. In analysing the evidence listed, the evaluator should also, where appropriate, comment on its quality i.e. the question of there being too much, too little, and/or the overall effectiveness of the evidence in meeting its purpose could be addressed.

Note that while deviations and inconsistencies mentioned above may be brought to the Provider's attention, it may be that the Provider can provide appropriate justification.

Finally, an evaluator might select a number of examples of evidence that he/she will ask the Provider to produce during the site visit.

### **Analysis – Programme Evaluation Report**

In analysing the Programme Evaluation report (PER) the evaluator might find the following questions useful:

Is there a clear summary of the programme?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the evaluation methodology clearly set out in the report?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was the evaluation methodology appropriate for the programme(s) and related services?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are strengths, areas for improvement and recommendations set out for each of the areas?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are conclusions made in respect of achievement of programme objectives?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is there evidence that staff and learners participated in the review?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were the grades consistent with the evidence as presented in the checklist?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were the detailed findings (i.e. strengths and areas for improvement) justified by the evidence stated/data?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Would the recommendations listed lead to an improved programme? Are the recommendations realistic?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is there an implementation plan?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are there control measures built into the implementation plan i.e. milestones, feedback etc.? Has responsibility been assigned and timelines?	<input type="checkbox"/>

## 8. Dissemination of Findings - Sample Agenda

The following is a suggested agenda for the meeting between the External Evaluator and the Provider. This agenda is particularly relevant to situations where the External Evaluator becomes involved towards the end of the evaluation process (i.e. after the Self Evaluation checklist, Self Evaluation Report and Programme Improvement Plan have been drawn up.)

### Meeting Agenda (sample)

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*Meeting:*                    *Self Evaluation Review Meeting – External Evaluator*

*Programme(s)*

*Date/Time:*

*Provider/Centre*

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1	Introduction	External Evaluator outlines nature and scope of the meeting
2	Overview of Provider's Approach to Self-Evaluation	Provider gives account of the methodology used to get to this point
3	Walkthrough <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Checklist</li><li>▪ Self / Programme Evaluation Report</li><li>▪ Programme Improvement Plan</li></ul>	The evaluator leads the walkthrough – the Provider is invited to respond to certain issues and questions and produce evidence where requested
4	Conclusion and Next Steps	Both evaluator and Provider agree on any outstanding issues to be addressed

## 9. Sign-off

The External Evaluator will sign-off on the Provider's Self Evaluation when there are no outstanding issues to resolve. This may be done either at the end of the site visit meeting or at a later stage. Depending on the nature of these issues a further meeting between the Provider and the External Evaluator may need to be agreed.



The Further Education Support Service is funded through the Department of Education and Science.

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