



etbi

Education and Training
Boards Ireland

*Boird Oideachais agus
Oiliúna Éireann*

DEVELOPING AN ETB SECTORAL MODEL

FOR THE

EXTERNAL AUTHENTICATION¹ OF ASSESSMENT

CONSULTATION PAPER

¹ Current working term for this consultation process

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Introduction

The purpose of the external authentication process is to provide independent authoritative confirmation of fair and consistent assessment of learners and to ensure that assessment results have been marked in a valid and reliable way. External authentication is undertaken through the assignment of an independent Authenticator by the provider², i.e. the ETB. Consistent with QQI guidelines and requirements, ETBs currently assign Authenticators to their centres to provide independent authoritative confirmation of learner assessment.

The former FET Awards Council established a panel of External Authenticators across a wide range of learning domains. This panel transitioned to QQI on its establishment in 2012, and currently remains available to QQI quality assurance providers. The former agency FÁS, established its own sub-panel of External Authenticators, and implemented a national approach to briefing and training, including a mentoring/shadowing process for new External Authenticators. Though it remains available to providers, QQI does not recruit to, or provide training to, the legacy national panel.

ETBs assign External Authenticators from both the QQI national panel and from the former FÁS panel, which transitioned to the ETBs. Some ETBs have also established regional and local panels. Training of these new External Authenticators has been provided by the Further Education Support Service (FESS), on direct request from ETBs.

The ETB FET Directors recognise the importance of the External Authentication role and process in ensuring the validity and reliability of the assessment process within the overall, provider owned, assessment framework.

On behalf of the ETBI FET Directors' QA Strategy Group, a project was commissioned in November 2016, to research and review current approaches to external authentication within the sector. The project aimed to identify and recommend the necessary elements of a new ETB sectoral model and approach to external authentication, which would enhance consistency in the sector in quality assuring programme standards and learner achievement.

The methodology undertaken to complete this project was a combination of research on national and international practice, focus groups and key stakeholder discussions. A thorough review of all elements of the current external authentication process was undertaken, including the related QQI guidelines, the role of the External Authenticator (EA), the EA panel, current approaches to EA training and the EA process. This consultation paper was devised from and informed by this process.

Throughout this paper, the role title External Authenticator is referenced as a working title, even though the paper recommends that there is opportunity to consider an alternative title for the role within the sector in the future.

This consultation paper now presents proposals for a new ETB sectoral model for external authentication.

² <https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Quality%20Assuring%20Assessment%20-%20Guidelines%20for%20Providers%2C%20Revised%202013.pdf>

1. Background and Context

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012 sets out the detailed responsibilities that apply to the ETBs for quality assuring their programmes of education and training and related services. The Act also established Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as the authority with responsibility for approving and reviewing the effectiveness of providers' quality assurance procedures.³

QQI has established Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines⁴ for providers and new Sector Specific Quality Assurance Guidelines for the ETBs are expected by Summer 2017.

The FET Strategy 2014-2019 provides a clear policy context for quality in further education and training (FET). One of the five goals within the strategy is 'Quality Provision - *that FET will provide high quality education and training programmes and will meet national and international quality standards.*'⁵ The quality assurance of its education and training provision is a high priority on the governance agenda of ETBs.

ETBs are working collectively through the ETBI FET Directors Forum on establishing the foundations for the development of a sectoral QA Framework that will enable and support the ETBs in delivering on quality objectives. The ETBI FET Directors QA Strategy Group is overseeing the implementation of several collective sectoral quality assurance projects on behalf of the FET Directors' Forum, including the development of a sectoral model and approach to the external authentication of assessment.

³ QQI published new *Core Statutory Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines* and new *Policies and Criteria for the Validation of programmes of education and training* in April 2016.

⁴ <http://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Core%20Statutory%20Quality%20Assurance%20Guidelines.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Further-Education-and-Training-Strategy-2014-2019.pdf>

2. External Authentication

As outlined in the following extract from QQI Guidelines, the external authentication process is a post assessment engagement with a centre conducted by an **independent External Authenticator** to⁶:

- "... ensure **fairness, consistency and validity** of assessment and of the outcome of assessment for learner results...
- "... ensure **accurate and quality assured** learner results
- "...provide **independent confirmation of fair and consistent assessment** of learners in line with **QQI requirements**".
- ... make an informed judgment on the **consistency** of the assessment decisions in the context of the **award standards**..."

The external authentication process establishes the "**credibility** of the provider's assessment processes and ensures that assessment results have been **marked in a valid and reliable way and are compliant with the requirements for the award**". A centre's authentication system "**should contribute significantly to quality**".

The external authentication role and process is analogous to that of external examining in higher education and training, both nationally and in other jurisdictions. QQI 'Effective Practice Guidelines for External Examining February 2015'⁹ describe external examining as 'a quality assurance mechanism employed by providers' a principal outcome of which is 'the introduction of an independent element into the procedures for the assessment of learners' (p 1). The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) joint research report¹⁰, describes the role of the External Examiner as being 'essentially that of an Authenticator. They do not carry out the marking of individual students assessed work but moderate the marking carried out by Internal Examiners' (p 1).

The external authentication role and process is pivotal to an ETB's assessment framework in assuring the quality and effectiveness of learner assessment.

⁶ Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for External Authenticators, Revised February 2015

⁷ Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for Providers, Revised 2013

⁸ Sector Specific QA Guidelines for ETBs – White Paper (Consultation)

⁹<https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Effective%20Practice%20Guidelines%20for%20External%20Examining%20Revised%20February%202015.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/External-Examiners-Report.pdf>

3. Proposed Elements for Consultation

3.1 National ETB Sector Panel

There was consensus, through the stakeholder focus group process, that the current authenticator panel, hosted by QQI, is no longer fit for purpose. Many panel members are not active in the role and there are no evidential plans to expand or renew the panel. In fact, it is anticipated that QQI will no longer host the panel in the foreseeable future. Some ETBs have taken the initiative to establish their own panel with training facilitated by FESS. But there is no national sectoral consistent approach to this, and it is considered that an escalation of this individual approach is not in the best way forward for a sustainable quality model.

Establishing and maintaining a central panel for the sector would require the allocation and resourcing of personnel and an IT infrastructure to manage and administer the panel. ETBs and centres would require access to a process management portal dedicated to the authentication panel and process. Management of the national panel would require the development of a central database to assist in initial recruitment and tracking of External Authenticators appropriate to specific fields of learning. The creation of such a database would also facilitate the generation of reports and their delivery to ETBs and centres by email ('workflow' model).

Proposal 1

It is recommended that the ETB sector establishes an ETB national panel for the sector. The mechanism and resources for establishing, hosting, training and maintaining the panel would need to be determined, but some form of coordinated/centralised database to host the panel should be established.

Membership of the national panel would be for a fixed period, renewable on the completion of supplemental professional development training.

3.1.1 Advising Externs to the Panel

Through the focus group discussions with both centre management and current operating External Authenticators, concern was expressed with regards to the lack of coherent supports, advice or mentoring access for new External Authenticators. QA officers and FESS colleagues noted that they were inundated with calls from new Authenticators seeking clarification and advice through the external authentication process.

All highlighted the need to establish a team of experienced advising colleagues to be available, for new External Authenticators, but also to provide a sounding board and colleague for all practicing externs in conducting the role. (Some noted this was in place and worked successfully in the past in the sector, and is in place in other sectors and examination/awarding bodies). A national team of advising experienced External Authenticators within specific fields of learning would contribute also to the development of communities of practice and networks within these fields.

Proposal 2

It is recommended that a national team of Advising Externs be established within the panel to mentor, support and advise the External Authenticator in conducting the role.

3.2 Training

The professional development and training programme for External Authenticators must systematically address the principles of valid, reliable, fair, consistent and fit for purpose assessment, as well as the mechanics of moderation.

Pivotal to the success of the role is the capacity of External Authenticators to consistently apply a shared understanding of programme standards. Consequently, the recruitment and training processes are key elements in ensuring a robust and quality external moderation process.

Proposal 3

It is recommended that a national sectoral approach be taken to the training and development of this role, and that an ETB sectoral training and professional development programmes is established.

The structure and content of the professional development programme would need to be considered in detailed but it is proposed that it should include as a minimum:

- **Approaches to moderation and standardisation of assessment**
- **Effective report writing**
- **Annual briefing and debriefing sessions**
- **Annual briefings and debriefings for ETB management/QA staff/centre managers/principals**
- **National and international practice**

3.3 Developing a Community of Practice

A coherent and structured professional development and training programme provides an opportunity to develop a clear and common understanding of the role and a strong community of practice within the sector

Proposal 4

It is further recommended that the proposed ETB National Panel be supported by ongoing development, to include; sectoral guidelines, meetings, training, group discussion, website portal, online forum, etc. In this regard, it is recommended that the hosting organisation should, through these and other mechanism, facilitate the development of a Professional Community of Practice.

3.4 Role and Process

The External Authenticator is currently required to judge *“a sample of learner evidence and results to ensure consistency with the standard and grading criteria”*. There were recurring challenges identified through the sectoral focus groups on the role. The following summarises these and makes several associated proposals on the role and process.

1. **Work load**

The feedback indicates the need for clarity on what can be realistically achieved by an External Authenticator in a single day. Some current External Authenticators felt there was an unrealistic expectation by some centres in this regard. The workload and volume needs to be considered in planning for the external authentication process and the visit, consideration needs to be given to adding additional days or additional External Authenticators to complete the process.

It is proposed that Sectoral guidelines on sampling strategy and reasonable sample size for authentication could be devised.

2. **Briefing/Debriefing**

The centre/ETB should issue thorough and comprehensive briefing documentation to the External Authenticator, well in advance of the scheduled date. It is expected, and must be stated to the External Authenticator, that they read and have understood the content of this documentation. A briefing/debriefing session should always take place between the External Authenticator and the centre's contact person. There should be clarity on centre expectations and there should be no surprises, following a debriefing session, in the External Authenticator's formal report.

3. **Feedback**

It is recommended that External Authenticators have the opportunity to speak with both staff and learners (either in person or remotely by telephone/tele-conference) at a centre and be informed on their respective experiences of the centre's assessment process. This engagement would significantly inform the External Authenticator in confirming fair and consistent, fit for purpose assessment¹¹.

¹¹Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for Providers, Revised 2013

4. **Grade Changes**

Comprehensive feedback and guidance should be provided when an External Authenticator recommends the need for grade changes to align the centre's standard with the award standard.

5. **Staff CPD**

ETBs should avail of the opportunity to invite External Authenticators back to centres to provide CPD sessions for staff and share their experiences of good practice observed in completing their role.

Proposal 5

The role and process should be supported by comprehensive guidelines on process to include mechanisms for briefings and feedback as outlined in 1-5 above

3.5 **Engagement Pre-Assessment**

The authentication of assessment results is currently a process conducted post the assessment. However, the External Authenticator could be involved in the process at an earlier stage, i.e. in pre-commencement planning. For example, the Authenticator could complete a review and provide recommendations on the appropriateness of assessment instruments, consistent with the minimum intended programme learning outcomes.

The External Authenticator could comment on draft examination papers, assessment briefs, marking schemes, model solutions, etc. This approach would, in the first instance, assist in assuring that valid, reliable, fit-for-purpose assessment instruments are being planned. It would also expedite the post-assessment engagement of the External Authenticator with the centre. It is acknowledged that engaging with External Authenticators, in this way, has resource and planning implications for programme teams.

Proposal 6

It is proposed that the future role could also include pre-assessment engagement, which in many instances could be achieved remotely without the need for a site visit.

3.6 **Standardisation of Assessment**

A key responsibility of the External Authenticator role is to ensure *"fairness, consistency ... of assessment and of the outcome of assessment for learner results across each major, special purpose, or supplement award."*

1. **Fairness and Consistency of Assessment within a Centre**

All FET centres and ETBs are committed to minimising organisational risk as it relates to consistency of assessment and award standards within and between centres. The standardisation of a programme's assessment techniques, instruments and outcomes within centres can be a challenge. It requires programme teams to direct significant time and resources towards the pre-planning of programme delivery and assessment. It necessitates the ongoing review of delivery and assessment as the programme progresses, culminating in team activity to assure the consistency of assessment

across the team. It is imperative that a learner taking a programme at a centre is in no way advantaged or disadvantaged in their assessment achievement.

Developing the role of the External Authenticator to establish the *credibility* of a centre's assessment process, would provide independent authoritative feedback to centres and to ETBs on the suitability and rigour of a programme's assessment process.

Proposal 7

It is proposed that the future role of External Authenticator includes confirming procedures to assure *fairness and consistency* of assessment between programme teams in a centre.

Engaging an External Authenticator in pre-assessment activity, as outlined above, would significantly facilitate a programme's team in achieving the standardisation of assessment objectives. There is the added benefit that the External Authenticator is building up a relationship with the team early in the programme and can act as a 'guide on the side' or 'collaborative friend' as the programme progresses from commencement to certification.

2. Exemplar Documentation

There is opportunity for collaboration, both within and between ETBs, in the development of exemplar documentation to support programme delivery and assessment. This approach would also support assessment standardisation; exemplar portfolios for assessment, exemplar briefs, exemplar examination papers, etc. However, care should be taken, when using exemplars, not to dilute the provider or centre's assessment responsibilities and to ensure that the practice does not lead to a compliance approach to delivery and assessment. Access to exemplar documentation would benefit the ETB sector.

3.7 The External Authenticator Report

The QQI guideline requires that external authenticators “*provide an external authentication Report based on an independent evaluation of a centre’s assessment process and procedures*”. The report should “*provide constructive feedback to the centre management and staff*” and *identify and highlight good practice and comment on areas for improvement within the assessment process.*

Centres should view the objective and independent appraisal in the External Authenticator’s report as an essential component in progressing its commitment to fostering a culture of continuous development and improvement.

The preparation of the External Authenticator’s report is a key duty of the role. Reports, professionally written by well informed and experienced subject matter experts are invaluable in informing the quality agenda within a centre. A tick-the-box approach is unhelpful and contributes little to this agenda. Reports should be robust, evidence based and supportive.

Proposal 8

It is proposed that future external authenticator reporting within the ETB sector is supported by the development of an online template that includes drop down lists and open format sections, as required fields. This approach could assist the External Authenticator in completing the report to a required format, with comments and observations. It would require the development of an online portal to which the Authenticator has access.

Proposal 9

The following reporting lines are proposed for the External Authenticator's report in the future:

1. The report template should provide opportunity for the ETB or the ETB Centre to provide feedback and comment on the external authentication experience.
2. The ETB Centre should document a quality improvement plan for the implementation of a report's recommendations, as they arise.
3. The completed report, including the quality improvement plan and feedback for each programme, should be reviewed within the ETB's quality assurance governance processes.
4. Processes should be in place to enable consolidated External Authenticators' Report both across and/or within centres.
5. All External Authenticator reports, including the consolidated report and any quality improvement plans, should be submitted to the ETB for review.
6. These reports inform the ETB's oversight and governance of quality.
7. External Authenticator reports should contribute significantly to a ETB's schedule of programme reviews.
8. The External Authenticator appointed to authenticate a programme in the next certification period, should have access to the most recent report for that programme and provide comment on the centre's engagement with any quality improvement plan that applies.
9. Short and sketchy reports are of no benefit to an ETB centre's development and improvement agenda. Such reports should be followed up with a request, from centre management, for a more thorough approach.
10. External Authenticators should be open and supportive when issues of concern arise.

3.8 Publishing the external authenticator Report

The External Authenticators' consolidated report(s) and follow on quality improvement plan, as it arises, are formal indicators of quality provision within ETB centres. Consequently, they are key documents for publication, in line with QQI requirements on 'Public Information and Communication'.¹²

Proposal 10

It is proposed that a consolidated external authentication report(s) is published on the 'quality' section of the ETB's website. This will assist in assuring public confidence in the ETB's provision and promote the development of a culture of quality and improvement in centres.

3.9 ETB Role

The objective judgement of assessment processes reinforces the confidence of QQI and the public in an ETB's FET provision. Consequently, a rigorous approach must be taken in making appointments to the quality assurance role of External Authenticator.

Proposal 11

It is proposed that ETBs take the lead role in documenting an annual external authentication Plan for its centres. The plan should be drafted early in the academic year, in consultation with ETB centres. In devising this plan, the following is noted and proposed:

1. Appointing the same External Authenticator to a programme in different centres across the ETB has the potential to contribute significantly to the standardisation agenda across an ETB's provision.
2. Realistic budgets should be set aside and the process suitably resourced, in line with the strategic importance of the process.
3. Only suitable candidate, that meet the quality objectives and standards of the ETB and its centres, should be appointed.
4. It is recommended that External Authenticators are independent and external to an ETB – not just independent of the centre. This approach leads to greater objectivity in the role and protects against possible conflict of interest.
5. Budgetary considerations should not be allowed compromise corporate responsibility around the assurance of quality and the achievement of award standards.
6. ETBs should provide a comprehensive briefing on its quality agenda to External Authenticators before they commence their role. This could be achieved by an appropriate information pack.
7. External Authenticators should be subject matter experts, with the knowledge and skill to moderate assessment results against award standards at a component level.
8. ETBs should not engage current or past employees of the ETB as External Authenticators.
9. Collaboration between ETBs in appointing External Authenticators would assist in assuring standards across ETBs and provide opportunities for sharing good practice.
10. External Authenticators, deemed to have contributed significantly to an ETB's quality agenda, should be assigned to a centre for no more than three consecutive certification periods.

3.10 Title

The external authentication role and process is currently guided by published QQI guidelines¹³. It is worth noting that the current guidelines are the transferred legacy guidelines from the former FET awards council and may be subject to future change and amendment by QQI. The process has many strengths. However, the outcomes of the focus group discussions clearly indicate that there are significant opportunities to build on current practice considering developments and operational experiences since the guidelines were first published and the role and process established.

As ETBs are now on a new QA trajectory and relationship with QQI, it is an opportune time to review the 'title' of the role and to assign a new title which embraces the strengths of the current external authentication process, develops on that role, but also marks a clear move away from the legacy processes and practices¹⁴.

Proposal 12

It is proposed that a new title reflecting a new operating context and the future revised role is assigned. It is proposed that the title be revised to that of External Examiner or External Moderator.

Proposal 13

It is further proposed that the future role would conduct all tasks as previously undertaken by the External Authenticator, and would also formally confirm a centre's evidence of procedure implementation and quality assured assessment process to assure valid, reliable, fit for purpose, fair and consistent assessment.

¹³ Quality Assuring Assessment Guidelines for External Authenticators, Revised February 2015

¹⁴ Note: 'External Authenticator' will remain the current working term used for the purposes of this consultation document.

4. Core Elements and Summary Proposals

The Core Elements of the proposed ETB Sectoral approach to a new external authentication model and process are:

- 1) Establish an ETB Sector National Panel
- 2) Establish a national team of Advising Externs
- 3) Establish a national structured sectoral approach to training and professional development
- 4) Develop sectoral tools and mechanism to facilitate the establishment of a professional Community of Practice
- 5) Establish comprehensive guidelines on the process to include mechanisms for briefings and feedback
- 6) Extend the role to include pre-assessment engagement and involve the External Authenticator in assessment planning and design
- 7) Extend the role of the External Authenticator to include confirming procedures to assure *fairness and consistency* of assessment between programme team members
- 8) Implement consistent approach to reports, including common report templates supported by online documentation
- 9) Develop and document an annual external authentication Plan for the ETB, to include processes for review and evaluation of the work of the External Authenticators
- 10) A consolidated external authentication report should be published by the ETB
- 11) A documented external authentication plan should be developed by the ETB
- 12) Revise and establish a new fit for purpose title
- 13) Extend the responsibility to include confirmation of implementation of quality assured assessment procedures