

# External Authentication – An Overview

## Influence from a FET perspective

### Introduction

A recent Insights report by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI, 2020) identified that the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) FET Directors Quality Strategy group had led the recruitment of a new national panel of external authenticators for education and training boards (ETBs). It noted that national training was being developed which had been delivered face-to-face until early 2020, then an online iteration was developed and rolled out in 2021.

The national training also involved professional development in authentication in an online environment, authentication for recognition of prior learning (RPL), and other specific methodologies, including the integration of universal design for learning (UDL) practices and principles that enhance the teaching and learning experience in the learning environment.

This article will briefly explore the impact of the online training programme, the professional development series, and the influence on best practice for creating a culture of engagement and enhancement in the learning environment. It will highlight specific nuances and challenges of external authentication and its role in the further education and training (FET) sector.

### The F factor: ‘To fear or to flourish’

The impact of external authentication, with all its permutations and implications, can vary considerably with the situation and placement of the individual. If you are on the ground, working with and assessing learners’ achievements, it can strike fear into your marrow. Questions such as ‘Will the work hit the mark?’, ‘Is it good enough?’, ‘Does it clearly evidence learners’ attainment



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**This article explores the impact that an effective and robust external authentication process can have on assessment and on teaching and learning practice. It also considers its influence on the creation of a culture of engagement in the learning environment of further education and training.**

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and progress?', and 'Will the external authenticator get it?' are interrogations that take place internally and externally for us as FET assessors.

Centre coordinators, managers, and principals can get caught up in the frenzy of meeting deadlines for internal verification, hosting centre results meetings with course teams, and ensuring that everything is organised for the onslaught of the dreaded external authenticator (EA) visit. For quality-unit personnel and senior management, there is the pressure of ensuring that standards are being met, that results approval meetings are carried out effectively with enhancements to the processes explored for future authentication periods, that submissions for certification for all learners are submitted on time, and that the all-important feedback is conveyed to assessors and relevant centre personnel. This can also be used for future monitoring and self-evaluation.

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For EAs themselves, there is the responsibility of ensuring that they carry out their role objectively and fairly using their professional knowledge and experience, completing a comprehensive, constructive, and detailed report, and communicating clearly to relevant assessors, centre staff, and quality personnel, while ensuring that award standards are maintained and the integrity of the process is upheld.

It is little wonder, then, that the key authentication periods are often fraught with anxiety, tension, and high expectations. Authentication is not unlike an iceberg, whose tip is visible above the waterline but whose bulk remains hidden beneath. The finality of the assessment piece is what is evident as an end product of the teaching and learning, but the greater substance and often extraordinary efforts involved in getting to that stage can be subsumed by the end goal and rendered invisible and inconsequential. One aspect that can be overlooked is the support and training of EAs themselves.

### Preparation and training supports

In order for EAs to undertake their responsibilities and fulfil their role to the utmost of their professional capabilities, they must have engaged with the briefing process, inducting them into the initial stages, and participated in a comprehensive training programme. Since the new ETBI EA National Directory was initiated in 2019, this training had been facilitated face to face by ETB and Further Education Support Service (FESS) colleagues. By mid-2020, the briefing and the training programme had moved online. This has allowed for a full and robust training rollout, with learning material accessed asynchronously, interspersed with engagement in live online sessions, reinforcing the learning and allowing opportunities for questions and lively discussion.

## Building collaborative relationships

From a quality-assurance viewpoint, the value of engagement and building relationships with EAs is multifaceted. As a small or medium-sized enterprise in their specific field, with an understanding of assessment delivery and relevant teaching or industry experience, an EA can collaborate with a provider and become involved in pre-assessment engagement, helping to ensure that before delivery the assessment instruments are purposeful and relevant, allowing learners to show and evidence their learning within the standards set by the award. This can help dispel any potential discord over assessment briefs or the application of assessment instruments when the authentication period rolls around. As an invaluable 'guide on the side', the objectivity, experience, and constructive support provided by an EA is worthy of merit.

The FET sector recognises the impact of a well-designed and fully scaffolded training programme for EAs, one that is supported by the provision of ongoing relevant professional development with the intention of reinforcing and enhancing the existing skill set of participants. Among the topics that have been broached with EAs in the recent past are remote authentication, practical approaches in the field, what UDL-based assessment can look like, and assessment of RPL.

## Conclusion

Building a community of practice among external authenticators, and enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of the role they can play in assessment and authentication, is an ongoing and continuously evolving journey. It is linked inextricably with a robust, holistic, and supportive quality process, where an ETB's quality-assurance system is also supported to facilitate a two-way dialogue that is enabled to equally challenge what an EA may state in their report, and also to collaborate with, in order to advance the quality agenda of the ETB FET sector. Such engagements and interactions will ensure the continued flourishing and enrichment of the authentication process.

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## REFERENCES

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2020) *Quality in Irish Further Education and Training 2020*. Dublin: QQI. [www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/2020-etb-quality-reporting.pdf](http://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-11/2020-etb-quality-reporting.pdf).