

Handbook on the Internal Review Process for Schools

Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE)

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CONTENTS

1 Purpose of Handbook	5
2 Quality Assurance in Schools	5
Step One: Plan and Evaluate.....	6
Aspects of school life to consider during the internal evaluation process.....	8
Research tools that inform school self-evaluation and the evaluation of action plans.....	9
Step Two: Analyse and Prioritise.....	11
The SWOT analysis.....	11
Tips on how to compile a SWOT analysis:.....	12
Prioritisation exercise	13
Choice of priorities	13
Step Three: Developing Action Plans	14
Step Four: Implementation and Monitoring.....	16

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The Internal Review Cycle.	6
Figure 2. Questions to ask to guide self-reflection based on the school's context.	7
Figure 3. Different research tools to inform self-evaluation.	10
Figure 4. SWOT analysis.	12
Figure 5. Devising a SMART action plan.....	15

1 | Purpose of Handbook

This handbook is about the internal reviews carried out by schools. It is intended to guide schools with using the established National Standards and success criteria to steer their internal evaluation and school development planning. Success criteria provide clear guidance as to how one can evaluate schools according to the National Standards. The handbook can be used by stakeholders, particularly school leaders and educators, to develop an understanding and provide guidance on how internal reviews can be carried out by the school community. The end objective of this process is to help schools work towards improving the quality of their educational provision. It requires stakeholder engagement and commitment, based on ongoing professional dialogue.

2 | Quality Assurance in Schools

The DQSE has invested in developing nationally agreed standards for school quality and in aligning internal and external review processes which form the basis of its functions, and which mirror the NCF (2012:32): “Quality assurance is to be realised through a system of ongoing self-evaluation, monitoring and review within schools complemented by an external review system that together foster school improvement.” This is an exercise to create a balance between autonomy and accountability and between a centralised and decentralised system of quality assurance mechanisms. At the heart of this vision is the internal review process (school self-evaluation). Effective internal review and the actions that flow from it should deliver improved educational outcomes and experience for all learners. Internal review must be an integral part of the school development planning process, with the resulting actions and objectives captured and mirrored in the School Development Plan (SDP), while also reflecting and responding to standards emanating from national policies and strategies.

Figure 1 explains the internal review cycle and the different stages that the school embarks upon when conducting this self-evaluation exercise. Each stage will be expounded in the chapters that follow.



Figure 1. *The Internal Review Cycle.*

Step One: Plan and Evaluate

Planning for and developing a process which is thorough, and which clearly tackles the realities of the school, is no easy feat. Ultimately, it is this process which will determine the priorities the school will work on. The aim of any school which undertakes this process seriously is the development of a school development plan (SDP). The SDP is not just a document, but a working tool used to plan for and bring about school improvement. To this effect it is important for the school leadership team (SLT) to plan ahead as to how this process is going to be developed. Figure 2 provides varied questions that help the SLT in planning for the internal review.

This forward planning can be linked to the method and timing of collection and analysis of feedback gathered from different stakeholders, as well as the integration of the vision for improvement in this process. Forward planning can also be decisive when it comes to any training which the leadership might feel is needed to prepare for the future implementation of priorities linked to learning and teaching. The SLT is to play an important role in facilitating the development process when it comes to guiding teaching staff in writing the action plans. Besides increasing ownership, this will support the idea of having a strategic development plan which is a result of a well thought-out process and which reflects how the needs of the school will be translated into actions in the classroom which will reach all learners.

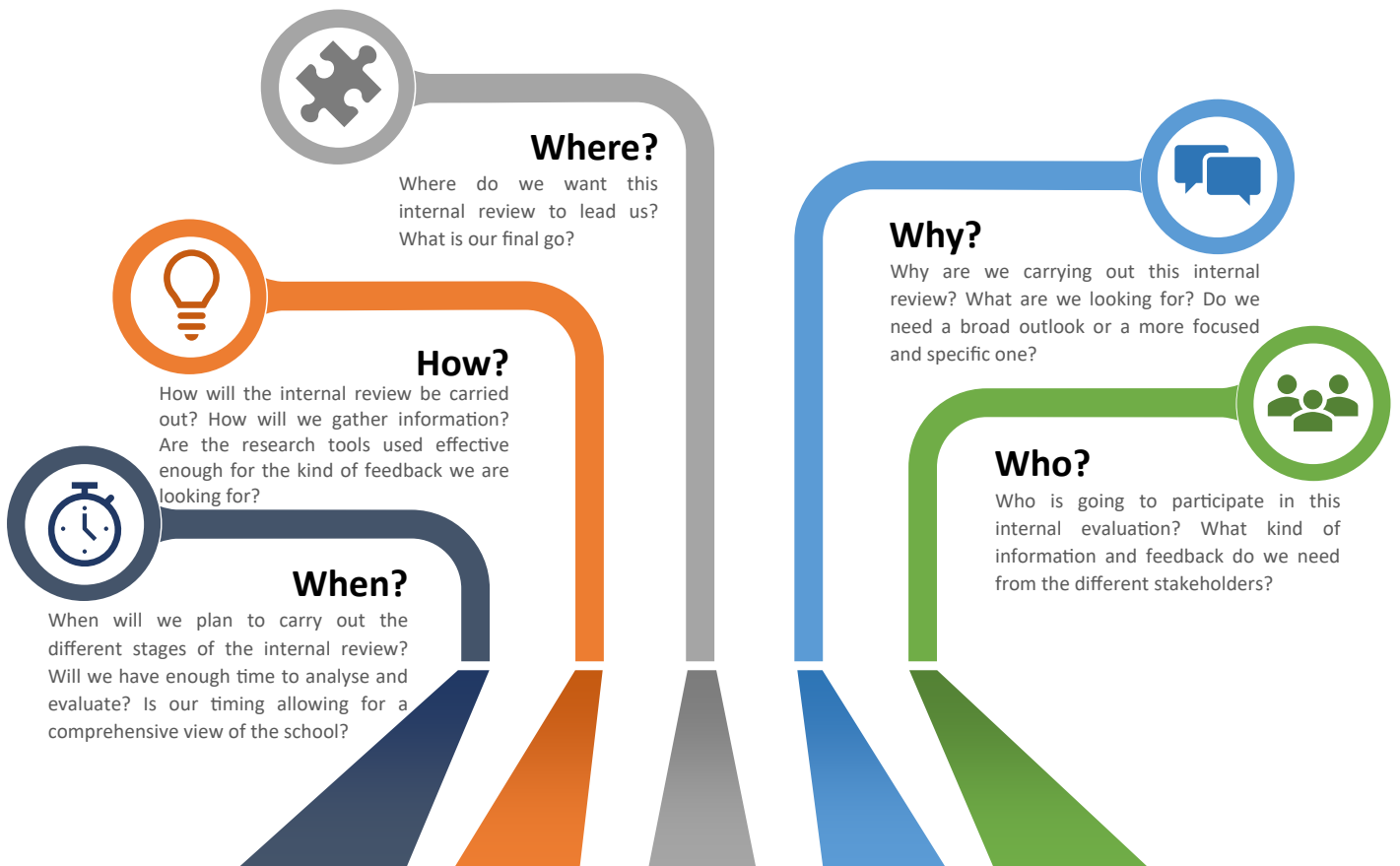


Figure 2. Questions to ask to guide self-reflection based on the school's context.

Aspects of school life to consider during the internal evaluation process

When conducting an internal evaluation exercise there are important aspects of school life that should be taken into consideration. The questions below are related to these aspects and are key to developing an understanding of the specific context of the school.

School population

- Who are the learners attending our school?
- What are the needs and wishes of their parents?
- What are their needs? Has there been an increase/decrease/change in school population. If yes, why?
- How will it affect the school?

Support

- What kind of external support is the school currently getting?
- Do we need more/different kind of support?

Human resources

- What are the experiences/qualifications/strengths of the teaching staff?
- How many teachers and LSEs form part of my staff?
- What is my staff turnover? Is it low? High? If yes/no, why?

Academic results

- How well are learners performing in national assessments/SBAs or internally vis-a-vis previous years?

Training

- What type of continuous professional development has been organized for teaching staff?
- Is it addressing the needs of the school?
- What kind of upskilling do we need to focus on next?

Physical resources

- What is the state of our facilities and material resources?
- How are the resources being utilised?

Research tools that inform school self-evaluation and the evaluation of action plans

Regular evaluation of action plans, as part of the school's ongoing self-evaluation process, contributes towards ensuring that all learners are being reached and that set targets are being achieved successfully. The evaluation of previous action plans can be included as part of the SWOT analysis (see Section 4). This can be achieved by using different research tools (Fig. 3). The Research Unit may be contacted for possible support in this matter.

Lesson observations

Lesson observations by the SLT can be an important tool because they help to:

- Ther SMT to better understand, through first-hand experience, the realities teachers face in the classroom. This in turn helps SLT to reflect on the type and level of support needed.
- Evaluate the level of learning and teaching at an individual and school level which is ultimately the core element of school life.
- Provoke teacher reflection and improvement particularly through formative feedback.
- Lead to the SLT's vision on learning and teaching.
- Evaluate the implementation of action plans.
- Highlight areas for school development.
- Highlight good practices.

Questionnaires with different stakeholders

Questionnaires may be used as one of the research tools to gather feedback from educators, parents, and learners. A focused approach towards developing questionnaires would contribute towards gathering feedback which is:

- Relevant
- Can be triangulated and
- Utilised efficiently to inform planning and development.

The questionnaires should include questions which can, for instance, help understand whether the initiatives taken on during the current year have been successful or not. Questions can also focus on issues which might have been identified through lesson observations. Having separate questionnaires for teachers and LSEs may provide a more comprehensive picture.

Analysis of academic results to identify trends

A trend analysis of academic results both at school level and vis-à-vis national results can be used as a tool to assess whether:

- The initiatives undertaken have been successful.
- Particular aspects need further development as part of the school's SWOT analysis.

Discussion groups

Feedback may be collected from discussions with educators and parents. It can also be used as a research method to inform the SWOT analysis. The SLT and teaching staff are also encouraged to find the time to get

direct feedback from learners. Feedback could also be obtained from the School Council and the Student Council or other committees. Feedback can be utilised to gather information on initiatives which the school is currently working on or others which are still at the planning or concept phase.

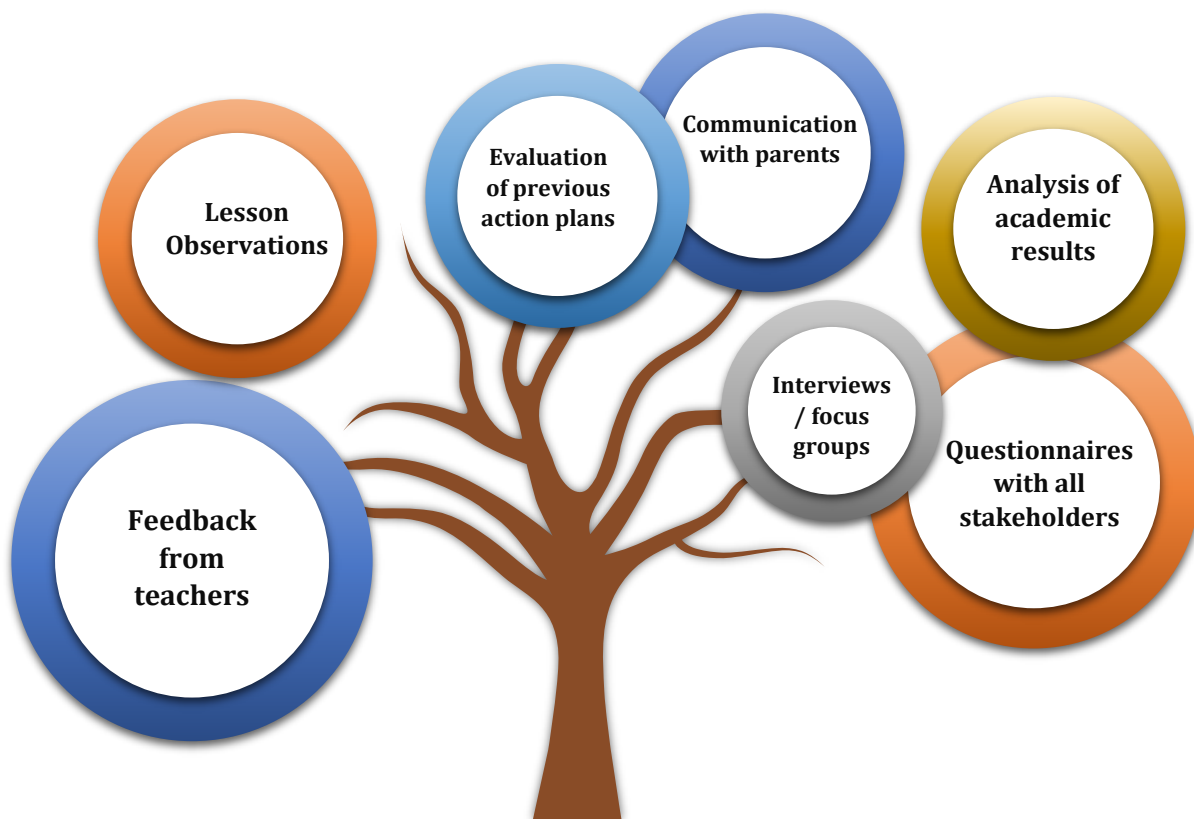


Figure 3. *Different research tools to inform self-evaluation.*

Feedback from teachers during curricular time/department meetings and professional development sessions

Curricular and department meetings may also be considered as sources of feedback. Moreover, they can be viewed as an opportunity to evaluate the strategies adopted in class which are linked to actions detailed in the current school action plans. Useful feedback can also be gathered during professional development sessions.

Communication with parents/ open days/meetings

Feedback from parents during individual or group meetings can be used as another source of feedback to inform the SWOT analysis. Parents' days offer opportunities for data collection since usually many parents attend. This could also be valid for other school activities, such as open days and meetings, depending on the particular context and aim of the feedback-gathering exercise.

Step Two: Analyse and Prioritise

The process of analysing the feedback collected, and then prioritising targets, is a key step of any effective school internal review process. This is usually done through a SWOT analysis that help decision-makers to take evidence-based decisions on what the school needs to focus on, as explained below.

The SWOT analysis

Used in the context of an analysis exercise, SWOT is an acronym for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. This technique can be used as a planning tool to understand where the school stands. It may be used as a framework for organising and using data information gained from situation analysis of the internal and external environment of a particular context. This can also help the school move from everyday problems and traditional practices or strategies to a fresh perspective.

When looking at the structure of the SWOT analysis (Fig. 4), it is worth noting that the Strengths and Weaknesses sections refer to aspects which are INTERNAL to the school. In many cases, these can be changed and moulded for school improvement. Opportunities and threats are aspects which are EXTERNAL factors; these cannot necessarily be controlled but are essential aspects to keep in mind.

Before compiling the SWOT analysis, it should be clear for the SLT what the vision for the school is and that this is shared with the different stakeholders. A clear vision helps the school focus on where it stands, where it wants to go, and what it should be focusing on to bring about school improvement. This vision would have been developed or substantiated through different sources throughout the scholastic year.

All data collected from the different research tools may be analysed by the SLT and may be distributed into the SWOT chart (Fig. 4) to produce a clear picture of where the different stakeholders believe the school stands. Presenting the staff with a compiled SWOT analysis will give a sharper focus to the prioritisation exercise. Schools need to build on the strengths and act on the weaknesses that emerge from the SWOT analysis.

The main outcomes emerging from the various research instruments used are to be included in the SWOT template below.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<i>These are internal things that you have some control over.</i>	<i>These are internal things that you have some control over.</i>
Opportunities	Threats
<i>These are external – outside of the school’s direct ability to control.</i>	<i>These are external – outside of the school’s direct ability to control.</i>

Figure 4. *SWOT analysis.*

Tips on how to compile a SWOT analysis:

- Do not list too many items in each category. Avoiding endless lists will save time and steer clear from possible misunderstandings. Items on the list need to be clearly defined as specific as possible.
- Make sure that items included can be developed as a whole school endeavour. Avoid including aspects which are opinions and not evidence based.
- Items on the list should be action-oriented to help prioritisation, addressing the most urgent needs first.

Prioritisation exercise

The stage following the compilation of the SWOT is the prioritisation exercise which has to be carried out at a whole school level with all the teaching staff. When prioritising the areas for improvement it is necessary to keep in mind different aspects that should be:

- Addressed immediately.
- Researched further.
- Planned for the future.

Prioritisation needs to be given to learning and teaching and how these may be further improved to address the *Framework for the Education Strategy 2014-2024* (2014) and other relevant national policies. It would be helpful if, once the different priority areas have been chosen, the members of staff discuss how to develop a clearly structured and focused priority development target which conveys, at a glance, what needs to be achieved. Schools may contact the Policy, Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate who would be able to provide support in this matter.

Choice of priorities

The selected priorities will have to be developed into SMART action plans which can tangibly push a whole school effort towards improvement. To carry out this effectively, it is advisable that the school should not develop more than THREE priority development targets. These priorities will in turn be developed into tangible action plans which will involve all the teaching staff, such as by year group or subject department.

Priorities can be linked to the different standards, however it is key to have a clear and tangible focus on the improvement of Learning and Teaching. Leadership and Management issues which concern directly the SLT can be mentioned, included in SWOT or discussed with the whole staff, but should not be considered when choosing the main priorities.

Step Three: Developing Action Plans

All chosen targets that go into an action plan must be written in a SMART manner. This is explained in Figure 5. The [action plan template](#), reproduced here for ease of reference, shows its different components. Schools may contact the School Internal Review and Audit Unit, who would be able to provide support in this matter.

S	Specific Clearly State your Goal
M	Measurable Ensure you can Measure Success
A	Attainable Set Goals you know you can Achieve
R	Relevant Set Goals Relevant to your Role
T	Time-Based Set a Deadline for Completion

KEY AREA: Teaching and Learning				
Priority Development Target	<i>Indicate the school priority addressed by this specific Action plan</i>			Link to national policies <i>Identify the national policy you are responding to:</i>
Success Criterion/Criteria	<i>By the end of the year what is the improvement you expect in this priority development area? How will you know that you have achieved the priority development target? What will learners gain after the implementation of this action plan?</i>			
Implementation: Enter the year group / subject department				
Actions	Steps to be taken	Timescale	Coordinator	Monitoring and evaluation
<i>WHO? WHAT? Indicate the action that will be taken by the teaching staff in your year group/department to reach the Priority Development Target</i>	<i>HOW? List in bullet form the specific steps you need to follow in order to implement the action to be taken.</i>	<i>WHEN? Indicate frequency and/or completion date and/or review date of the specific steps</i>	<i>Name the year group/department member coordinating the implementation of this action</i>	<i>Indicate the SLT member who will monitor this action and the specific tools required to evaluate</i>

Figure 5. *Devising a SMART action plan.*

The Action Plan Template

To download an editable version of the action plan template [click here](#).

Step Four: Implementation and Monitoring

The final step comprises the implementation and monitoring of the action plans. Keeping track of the action plans is an ongoing task aimed at providing direction towards the implementation of the actions. This requires that:

- Teaching staff are guided towards developing action plans which are relevant to their classroom practice, present new strategies that are SMART enough to facilitate implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Regular monitoring of the actions are aimed at providing support and improving effectiveness.
- The impact of the actions is evaluated by the SLT to guide further improvement.

Disclaimer

The DQSE retains the right to make necessary technical adjustments or updates to the Handbook on Internal Reviews of Schools from time to time. The most up-to-date version of the Handbook will be available on the DQSE website.