

Handbook on the External Review and Compliance of Schools

Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE)

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The purpose of this handbook

This handbook aims to help stakeholders, particularly school leaders and educators, develop an understanding about how external reviews and compliance checks are carried out in schools by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE).

The handbook explains the expectations of the review team and the school stakeholders, how evidence in relation to the aim of the review is gathered prior to and during the visit, and how different external review models are used for different purposes. This handbook also explains what school compliance checks involve as well as the licensing process for schools to be able to operate.

The end objective of the external reviews and compliance checks is to help schools work towards improving quality in education, as explained in Figure 1. This is a process which requires stakeholder engagement and commitment, based on professional dialogue.

This handbook is a valuable tool for school leaders and educators, that guides them through the external review and compliance check processes and achieve the expected outcomes.

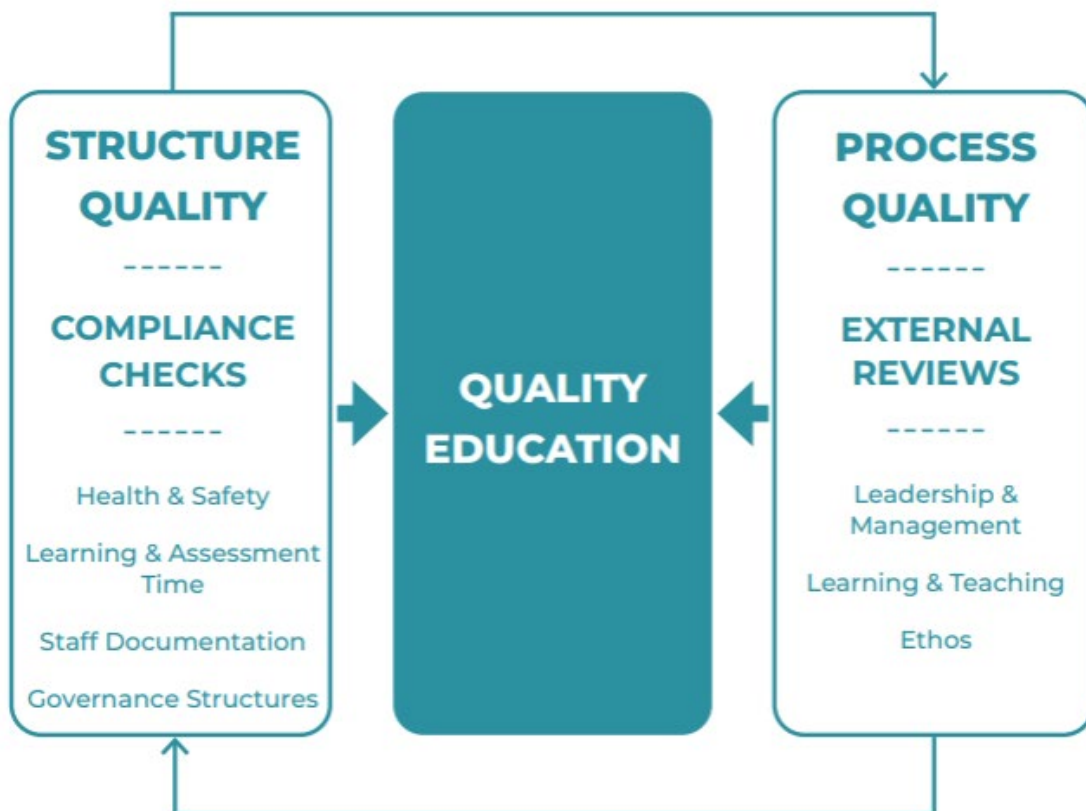


Figure 1: A holistic approach towards quality education

Structure Quality

Structure Quality, often referred to as 'compliance', consists of processes which look into how an educational institution is designed, organised and maintained. Key aspects of structure quality also strongly contribute to the licensing process. Amongst its fundamental components, structure quality includes staff suitability (qualifications and skills), the ratio of educators to children, adherence to learning and assessment time entitlement (contact time between educator and learner), health and safety requirements as well as the policies, procedures and practices that bear a direct impact on the organisation of the school.

The Regulation and Compliance Section (RCS) within the Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department of the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) regulates and assures the structural quality aspects of educational institutions, namely, childcare centres, Church and Independent schools, and summer schools. The RCS is composed of experienced officers trained in the rigorous, meticulous, and specialised tasks which structure quality involves. The following sections explain the processes associated with compliance checks.

Compliance Checks

Before an onsite compliance check is performed, officers perform background compilation of data. Subsequently, the team of officers visit these educational establishments and check for information in Planning Authority permits, health and safety risk assessment reports, and educational staff approval/acknowledgement amongst other important aspects of regulatory compliance. Compliance checks may be announced beforehand, or they may be unannounced especially, but not exclusively, when complaints are received which concern regulation and compliance issues.

Following the visit, a compliance check report is duly written, and monitoring is done to ensure that necessary action is implemented following feedback to the respective Heads of School and Legally Responsible Person. To this end a second visit is performed accordingly.

Consultation with stakeholders

The RCS is in constant contact with the Planning Authority and provides applicants with specialised advice during the planning stage of childcare centres and other educational institutions. It also consults with the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) to ensure access to all at the planning and the final stages of architectural design. The RCS also consults with the Education Resources Department of MEYR for information regarding approvals of reimbursement of salary and acknowledgements of notification of employment of employees within educational establishments.

Educational institutions

Educational institutions offer support to students with specific learning needs and abilities. These are governed by respective Memoranda of Understanding with the Ministry for Education and regulated by RCS according to requested documentation and protocols. Compliance checks in these institutions are performed accordingly by RCS officers.

School Licensing

The Regulation and Compliance Section (RCS) is responsible for the licensing of Church and Independent schools and conducts subsequent compliance check visits for quality assurance purposes. The following sections explain the processes associated with school licensing.

Pre-licensing phase

- a. Applicants may wish to consult with the RCS prior to submitting plans to the PA to ensure that the proposed plans are according to the [SL 605.02](#) National Minimum Conditions for all Schools Regulations.
- b. An applicant must submit a PA application to obtain a class 2C PA permit.
- c. During the application process, the PA consults with the DQSE amongst other entities.
- d. Once the PA permit is issued the school or educational institution is to complete all the works according to the PA permit.
- e. The PA permit on its own does not grant permission to operate as a school or educational institution service provider.

Licensing phase

- a. Once all works are completed and all documents are at hand, the LRP may proceed to the licensing process.
- b. An application form is to be duly filled online and submitted together with the required supporting documentation.
- c. Application forms and lists of required supporting documentation, may be accessed as follows:
 - [Church Schools](#)
 - [Independent Schools](#)
 - [International Schools](#)
 - [Educational Institutions](#)
- a. Once all the required documents are vetted, the DQSE officer issues an acknowledgement receipt to the applicant concerned.
- b. Within 3 months from the date of the acknowledgement receipt sent and should a licence be granted:
 1. The DQSE will notify the applicant for a temporary licence site visit to be conducted. This site visit will focus on the requirements set forth in the SL605.02 National Minimum Conditions for all Schools Regulations.

2. On completion of the visit, if all conditions have been satisfactorily addressed and no further action is required, the DQSE will proceed to issue a Temporary Licence valid for one (1) scholastic year.
 - a. The DQSE will carry out the necessary compliance checks and external review/s during the following scholastic year to determine whether to upgrade to a full licence.

Revision of licence

- a. An [application form](#) for revision of licence must be submitted online within three (3) months from the date of any change made as specified in [SL 605.02](#).
- b. Changes made by the schools or educational institutions are stipulated on the application form itself and are to be indicated accordingly.
- c. Following the submission of the revision of licence application form, the DQSE will request a number of supporting documentation to be submitted in relation to the type of change being made by the school or educational institution in concern.
- d. The DQSE may conduct a licencing revision visit as deemed appropriate.

Renewal of licence

- a. Any renewal of temporary licence [application form](#) must be submitted online to the DQSE by July 15 of every year.
- b. The school or educational institution is to contact the DQSE regarding renewal of a temporary licence by email at licenses.dqse.meyr@gov.mt
- c. The DQSE will communicate back to the provider in concern and direct him to fill in and submit the online temporary licence form.
- d. Following the submission of the renewal of licence application form, the DQSE will request any supporting documentation that needs to be submitted.

Withdrawal of licence

- a. The licence holder is to communicate with the DQSE regarding any withdrawal of a school or educational institution licence by submitting the withdrawal of licence application form online ([English version](#) / [Maltese version](#)) one (1) month before the effective date of Licence withdrawal, to allow the DQSE to process the licence withdrawal accordingly.
- b. Following the submission of the withdrawal of licence application form , within five (5) working days, the DQSE may request further supporting documentation to be submitted.
- c. Once all the required documents are vetted, within ten (10) working days, the DQSE officer informs the applicant whether the withdrawal of licence is granted or otherwise.

Process Quality

Process Quality focuses on the main aspects of the life of each learner at school. It specifically focuses on three key pillars of education, namely, Leadership and Management, Learning and Teaching, and Ethos. These areas form the basis of the National Quality Standards in Education (3-16 Years).

The External Review Process

What an external review is

An external review is an evaluation of a school focusing on the Process Quality. It is an instrument which, through formative feedback, guides and enables schools in their ongoing quest to improve their practices and outcomes with respect to the National Curriculum Framework. The external review acknowledges that the context of every school is different. The external review also serves as an instrument for achieving accountability with respect to the fulfilment of National Quality Standards in Education (3-16 Years). The ERS makes use of different external review models. The focus, duration and outcomes of an external review visit varies from one external review model to another.

What quality assurance mechanisms ensure a fair external review process

The ERS is committed to uphold its [core principles](#) and offer a quality service. It employs the following quality assurance mechanisms in its endeavours to secure fair external review processes, namely:

- a. The ERS bases its evaluation of schools on the National Quality Standards and subsequent success criteria, irrespective of the external review model being used.
- b. The parameters for the different external review models, namely procedures that take place before, during and after an external review, are public domain.
- c. The ERS has clear Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for every external review model. Such procedures ensure consistency in the approach adopted by the different external review teams. The SOPs are reviewed and updated regularly.
- d. The ERS Education Officers carrying out external reviews in schools are knowledgeable, qualified, and experienced educators. To minimise bias, Education Officers do not conduct reviews in schools where they have a conflict of interest.
- e. The external review teams gather information on the school for evaluation purposes through different research tools (primarily questionnaires, interviews and lesson observations) and from different stakeholders. Any conclusions drawn by the review team are based on the triangulation of evidence.
- f. The ERS gives great importance to the ethical considerations of confidentiality and anonymity when gathering information and when drafting the external review report or record of outcomes.
- g. Half-way through the Whole School or Focused external review, the Director or Assistant Director DQSE discusses and gathers feedback on the development of the

external review both from the Head of School and from the external review team. Such meetings serve to assure quality in the practices and procedures adopted during the external review.

- h. The Assistant Director and/or Director vet the draft report or record of outcomes written by the external review team.
- i. The Head of School has the possibility to give feedback on the draft report. The external review team takes this feedback into consideration before finalising the report or record of outcomes.
- j. Following a Whole School and Focused external review, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and educators can give their feedback on the accessibility and usefulness of the external review documentation, reliability of the process and professionalism of the external reviewers through an anonymous post-external review questionnaire. The ERS analyses the outcomes of these questionnaire responses and modifies its practices as necessary.
- k. Any complaints that reach the DQSE are looked into, and steps are taken to address any issues.

Stakeholders can lodge their complaint with the DQSE through customercare.dqse@gov.mt.

Triggers: How schools are selected

The following table indicates the possible triggers leading to the different external review models by ERS. Any external review model can be triggered by the Director due to any other relevant issue.

	Thematic review	One Day review	Whole School review	Focused review	Follow up
National education policy priorities	Yellow				
Over 2 years since last DQSE visits		Yellow	Yellow	Dark Yellow	
Trends in national and international student assessments	Yellow				
Formal and informal complaints	Yellow		Yellow	Dark Yellow	
DQSE analysis reports					
External review reports	Yellow		Yellow	Dark Yellow	Dark Yellow
Change in leadership		Yellow		Dark Yellow	
School/college request		Yellow	Yellow	Dark Yellow	

The Review Team

The remit of the review team

A team composed of ERS Education Officers carries out external reviews in schools. The size of each review team varies in number according to the school population. One member of the team is assigned the role of review leader. The review leader is responsible for communicating with the SLT, the smooth running of the review, and conducting a fair evaluation of the school. Besides working in synergy amongst them and in collaboration with the SLT and educators, the team members are responsible for gathering evidence that informs the overall evaluation of the school.

The remit of the ERS is to evaluate how far schools are planning for, and actually managing to reach, the National Quality Standards that ensure the equitable curricular entitlement of all learners.

Expectations from the review team and the school community

As shown in Table 2, an effective external review is a two-way process which necessitates good will from the parties involved. Communication between the review team and the school community must be open and continuous.

Review Team members

Members of the review team are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner throughout the whole process. They are expected to:

- Adhere to their [core principles](#).
- Be sensitive to the realities and challenges faced by the school community and select the most appropriate tools and techniques to gather evidence.
- Carry out a review process which is transparent at all stages, including communication on logistical matters, and the rationale behind the different processes.
- Interact with members of the school community through constructive dialogue with the aim of bringing about school improvement.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders should endeavour to adopt a positive and professional attitude during the entirety of the process. They are expected to:

- maintain an honest and positive relationship with the review team based on mutual trust, voicing any potential concerns through shared understanding and dialogue.

- collaborate with the review team in coordinating interviews and meetings and disseminating questionnaires with the aim of minimising disruption as much as possible.
- be committed to make of the external review an effective and successful process that identifies the strengths of the school as well as areas for school improvement.
- take the external review as an opportunity to engage in professional dialogue with the review team.

Table 2. The role of the Review Team and the school community

Expectations	Review Team	Stakeholders
Attitude	Adheres to core principles	Maintain a positive relationship with the review team members
Data gathering	Gathers evidence using appropriate tools	Collaborate in co-ordinating interviews and meetings and disseminate questionnaires prior to, during, and after the review
Transparency	Ensures transparency	Be committed to make of the process an effective exercise
School improvement	Promotes constructive dialogue based on evidence	Engage in a professional dialogue to promote school improvement

How evidence is gathered and analysed

The review team collects evidence in relation to the focus of the review visit through the involvement of various stakeholders using different research tools. The gathering and analysis of evidence varies according to the review model being used.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are disseminated among educators, learners and parents a few weeks prior to the external review. These questionnaires, which include close and open-ended questions, serve as an opportunity for stakeholders to give their views about various quality indicators related to their school. The anonymous questionnaire responses are used to identify potential lines of enquiry and to corroborate evidence gathered from other sources.

Observations

As well as observing educational activities and meetings, reviewers carry out [lesson observations](#) in the least intrusive way possible. Reviewers use a [lesson observation sheet](#) to

take notes on the quality of learning and teaching that takes place during the lesson, while maintaining teacher anonymity. These notes serve to facilitate dialogue with the class educators following observation as well as to identify trends across the school related to the quality of learning and teaching.

Interviews

The review team members carry out interviews with stakeholders, including SLT members, educators, learners, and parents. Interviews can take place on a one-to-one level or in a group.

Documentation

Apart from the Pre-External Review School Self-Evaluation document compiled by the Head of School, the reviewers gather evidence from [documents](#) such as the school policies, duties of different members of the school community, examination results, and the School Development Plan.

The external review team uses various techniques to analyse the data collected. The team organises the data coming from the open-ended questionnaire responses, school documentation and pre-review scoping interviews into themes. These, alongside graphical representations of the outcomes of the close-ended section of questionnaires and trends in examination results, give an indication of possible areas of strength and areas for development as well as inform lines of inquiry which guide the external review process.

During the external review, reviewers make use of a rubric to sustain their objectivity when evaluating the quality of learning and teaching. Furthermore, the graphical representation of the outcomes of lesson observations helps the external review team to identify trends in learning and teaching across the school. The outcomes from interviews with the various stakeholders carried out during the external review help reviewers identify recurring themes or significant findings, as well as confirm or discard the lines of inquiry. Discussions among the external review team members are pivotal in the analysis and triangulation of evidence gathered through the different research tools.

The approach adopted by the review team

The ERS places great emphasis on adopting a developmental approach throughout its work practices, particularly during external reviews. It promotes a culture of improvement and rigour that aims for high standards and equitable access to learning, especially during professional and constructive dialogues with educators and the SLT. The ERS acknowledges that the starting point for each learner, as well as for each educator and school, is different. While the target of fulfilling an equitable curricular entitlement remains the same for everyone, the routes to reach this goal are necessarily diverse. During external reviews, the team highlights and celebrates the consistent efforts of the school to lay out the diverse routes that the learning journey requires. It also suggests ways how to improve these efforts at classroom and school level.

Professional dialogue and engagement

Professional dialogue

An effective review process necessitates good will on behalf of all parties involved. Visiting Education Officers adhere to professional conduct as a core principle throughout the process, employing suitable techniques to gather evidence while considering the institution's context and challenges. Transparency in the review process is achieved through open and continuous communication between the review team and the school community. The review team actively engages the SLT and educators in professional dialogue, encouraging self-reflection on current practices.

During the external review, the SLT and educators may pose questions to Education Officers to alleviate concerns and ensure a smoother process. Lesson observations focus on pedagogy and learning and teaching trends rather than lesson content. Conclusions are drawn by the review team through focused discussions and thorough evidence triangulation, aiming to empower the school for improvement.

The primary objective of the review process should be clear to all members of the school community, including parents. Review models assess strengths, challenges, and offer recommendations for improvement.

Professional dialogues take place during interviews held throughout the external review, fostering reflection and professional growth by identifying strengths and areas for development.

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholders include all those who are directly involved in the educational journey of learners. They include, but are not limited to the SLT, educators, learners, and parents. Stakeholders play a key role in driving quality improvement and their engagement in the external review is crucial for its effectiveness. Their voices enrich the external review process as their multiple perspectives provide a more comprehensive picture of the quality of the education provision in the school. These voices further serve to triangulate the evidence that underpins the conclusions in the report or record of outcomes. Having stakeholders engaged in the external review process also increases the likeliness that the conclusions drawn from such a process are owned and recommendations acted upon. Moreover, the external review is an opportunity for both the SLT and educators to reflect on and modify their practices to bring about school improvement. Thus, the external review constitutes a means for professional growth.

The engagement of different stakeholders is solicited in various ways.

The Head of School may be engaged by:

- Being asked to reflect on and give an account of the school's progress in relation to a selection or all of the National Quality Standards.

- Giving views, explaining decisions taken, providing clarification and feedback through professional dialogue.
- Coordinating the logistics of the process, such as providing the necessary documentation, disseminating questionnaires where applicable, and setting up interviews and meetings with the aim of minimizing disruption.
- Evaluating the external review process and giving the ERS feedback for improvement purposes.
- Leading the school to make best use of the outcomes of the external review process for its ongoing improvement.

The other SLT members may be engaged by:

- Giving views, explaining decisions taken, providing clarification and feedback, especially, but not solely, on their areas of responsibility through professional dialogue.
- Coordinating the logistics of the process, such as setting up interviews and meetings with the aim of minimising disruption.
- Evaluating the external review process and giving the ERS feedback for improvement purposes.
- Participating in the planning and monitoring of the actions taken by the school to address the report's recommendations.

Educators may be engaged by:

- Giving their views on the school's practices, policies and atmosphere in a pre-external review questionnaire.
- Elaborating on the school's progress in relation to the National Quality Standards, as well as on their learning and teaching practices during interviews or focus groups.
- Having a professional dialogue with the external reviewer following lesson observation to sustain and/or improve their practices.
- Evaluating the external review process by means of a post-external review questionnaire.
- Participating in the planning and implementation of actions that address the report's recommendations.

Learners may be engaged by:

- Giving their views on the school's practices, policies and atmosphere in a pre-external review questionnaire.
- Elaborating on the educational provision during interviews or focus groups.
- Responding to reviewer's questions related to the lesson being observed.

Parents may be engaged by:

- Giving their views on the school's practices, policies and atmosphere in a pre-external review questionnaire.

- Elaborating on their child’s education provision during interviews or focus groups.

Different external review models

ERS uses five external review models to evaluate schools or aspects within schools. These are the One Day review, the Whole School review, the Focused review, the Follow-Up review, and the Thematic review (Table 2).

Table 2: External review models

Type of Review	Aim	Duration	Preparation by School	Outcomes
One-day	Evaluate how the school’s internal quality assurance mechanisms improve learning and teaching	1 day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SDP • Documents related to internal review • Teachers’ master timetable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused and formative feedback on quality standards related to internal review
Whole-school	Evaluate practices in relation to the three key areas against the National Quality Standards	3-5 days	Before the review: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SLT meeting with DQSE AD • Pre-external review self-evaluation • pre-external review questionnaires • Teachers’ master timetable During the review: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning documents related to teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in professional dialogue with the SLT and educators • Provide a comprehensive picture of the school in terms of the quality of its educational provision
Focused	Evaluate the school’s progress or performance against one or few of the National Quality Standard/s	3-5 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-external review self-evaluation • Questionnaires to stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a thorough and realistic picture of the school’s progress in the identified quality standard/s
Thematic	Inform policy makers on the situation in educational institutions in relation to national	3-5 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School’s documentation related to the specific focus of the review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thematic

	priority areas and on the outcomes of the implementation of national educational policies and agenda			
Follow-up	Validate the previous external review and to evaluate the progress made in the identified areas for improvement	1 day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-review action plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conclude, or otherwise, the external review process initiated through the Whole-school or Focused external review

The One Day review model

Why the ERS carries out this external review model

The purpose behind the One Day external review is to evaluate the school's internal quality assurance mechanisms and how well these promote improvement in learning and teaching for the benefit of all learners. This external review model focuses on specific Quality Standards, namely internal review and school development planning, learning and teaching, and formative assessment which is integrated in the learning and teaching process. The evaluation emanating from the One Day external review aims to provide the Head of School and relevant authorities with focussed and formative feedback on the aforementioned quality standards as well as guide the school in its quest for excellence. This model also aims to give the DQSE a snapshot about the school's progress vis-a-vis the three quality standards and on any other matter that becomes obviously of note during the review.

How schools are selected

A school can undergo a One Day external review if it satisfies one of the possible triggers for this model, including a span of at least two scholastic years from the last external review. The final selection of schools for this model is at the discretion of the Director DQSE.

How the school prepares for this review

There is no specific preparation which the school needs to carry out during the unannounced One Day external review visit. Nevertheless, during the visit, the Head of School provides the external review team with the most recent School Development Plan and other documents related to the previous and current internal review processes, as well as the teachers' master timetable. The provision of these documents facilitates the process and efficiency of the external review. Every term the school provides the DQSE with an updated calendar of events for logistical purposes.

Who carries out this review

A team of ERS Education Officers carries out the One Day external review. One of the Education Officers takes on the role of review leader. The team of reviewers varies in number according to the size of the school community.

How the review team develops its evaluation

The external review team bases its evaluation on triangulated evidence that emanates from individual or group interviews, lesson observations and documentation, primarily the SDP, as well as any other supporting documents.

In most cases, as the name of the model suggests, the review team concludes its evaluation during the day of the visit. In exceptional cases, the review team extends the external review to the following working day to ensure effective triangulation of evidence and a fair evaluation of the school.

Outcomes of the Review

Following its evaluation, the review team briefs the SLT about the main conclusions of the One Day external review. These conclusions reflect the school's main strengths and areas for improvement related to internal review and school development planning as well as learning and teaching and, possibly, other matters which the review team considers essential to note. The review leader formalises these conclusions in a record of outcomes. This document also proposes a way forward for the school. The record of outcomes is sent to the Head of School, the Head of College Network (or equivalent) and the respective education authorities. The Head of School is to share the record of outcomes in its entirety with the educators. The dissemination of the record of outcomes with the rest of the school community, then, is at the discretion of the Head of School after consultation with the Head of College Network (or equivalent). The One Day external review record of outcomes is not intended to give a comprehensive analysis of the school and it does not impinge on any decision to be taken on the school's licence. However, it is intended to help the school community to reflect on its practices and subsequently take action that leads to school improvement.

After the external review visit, the review leader schedules a post-review meeting with the Head of School and other school/college leaders to conclude the One Day external review process. This meeting, which normally takes place between one to three months after the review, aims to serve as a platform where the participants discuss and possibly improve the actions which the school community intends to take on board, or has started implementing, in response to the recommendations outlined in the record of outcomes. The outcomes of the One Day external review and post-external review meeting are among the factors that determine the next external review model for the school.

Whole-school review model

Why the ERS carries out this external review model

The aim of the Whole School external review is to contribute to quality enhancement of the educational provision in the visited school. This ERS does so by thoroughly considering all the National Quality Standards and presenting findings and recommendations on the school's practices in relation to the three key areas (Educational Leadership and Management, Learning and Teaching, and Ethos) to the Head of School, relevant authorities and the school community. As the report gives a comprehensive picture of the school, the report informs any decision to be taken on the school's licence.

How schools are selected

A school can undergo a Whole School external review if it satisfies one of the possible triggers for this model, including a period of over two years since the last external review. The final selection of schools for this model is at the discretion of the Director DQSE.

How the school prepares for this review

The school is informed six weeks before the external review visit takes place. The Assistant Director holds a meeting with the Head of School and asks him/her to prepare specific documentation to be sent to the review leader within three weeks. An important part of this documentation is the Pre-External Review School Self-Evaluation which is a reflective exercise compiled by the Head of School on how the school is performing in relation to the National Quality Standards. The Assistant Director also requests the Head of School to disseminate its standard pre-external review questionnaires to learners, parents and educators.

During the external review, educators can be requested to share their planning documentation in either hard or soft copy when necessary. No additional preparation beyond what is normally expected from educators is required. Regular communication between the school and the review leader is maintained throughout the whole process.

Who carries out this review

The Whole School external review is carried out by ERS Education Officers, one of whom would take on the role of review leader. The size of the team varies depending on the size of the school population.

How the review team develops its evaluation

The review team has three weeks to analyse the documentation provided by the Head of School as well as the outcomes of the pre-external review questionnaires before the external

review visit. Furthermore, a few days before the external review, the team visits the school and holds a series of introductory meetings and interviews with various stakeholders. All this enables the review team to identify lines of enquiry to be prioritised during the external review visit, which lasts between three and five days, depending on the size of the school community. The research techniques used during the review visit include individual and group interviews, reviewing of school documents as well as observations of lessons and activities held at school. Daily discussions within the review team are essential to achieve consensus on the analysis of the evidence as well as ensure that findings are triangulated. Moreover, the team involves the SLT and other educators in an ongoing professional dialogue to further strengthen its evaluation.

Outcomes of the Review

When requested, reviewers provide class educators with immediate verbal feedback after lesson observations. Such feedback contributes towards the educators' professional growth. On the final day of the external review visit the team holds a briefing with all members of the SLT to share the main conclusions on each of the three key areas of the National Quality Standards.

Following the review, the ERS issues a report with the aim of giving feedback about the school's progress, in a formative and developmental way. The Whole School external review report includes the findings, areas of strengths and a way forward for each of the key areas, as well as a few recommendations.

The report is sent to the Head of School, the Head of College Network (or equivalent) and the respective education authorities. It is accompanied by a report summary which is disseminated to all members of the teaching staff. The school is also bound to communicate with parents the outcomes of the report.

Once in possession of the report and report summary, the SLT and the educators devise a SMART post-review action plan aiming to address the recommendations highlighted in the report.

A post-review meeting is held a few weeks after the external review. During this meeting, the Head of School discusses with members of the ERS and school/college leaders the post-review action plan. The professional dialogue that takes place during this meeting ensures that stakeholders have a similar understanding of the outcomes of the report and of the recommendations that are to be addressed. It also facilitates the provision of any support required for the fulfilment of the planned actions.

The ERS follows up the recommendations of the external review report through one of its external review models during the following scholastic year.

Focused review model

Why the ERS carries out this external review model

The purpose of the Focused External Review is to evaluate the school's progress or performance against one or a number of the National Quality Standard/s. The evaluation emanating from this model aims to provide the Head of School, the school community and relevant authorities, including the DQSE, with a thorough and realistic picture of the school's progress in the identified quality standard/s. It also provides recommendations to further guide the school in its quest for continuous improvement.

How schools are selected

The selection of schools that will be evaluated through the Focused external review model is based on one or more factors or triggers, such as a span of over two years since the last external review or the outcomes of the external review report or record of outcomes. The final selection of schools for this model is at the discretion of the Director DQSE.

How the school prepares for this review

The ERS notifies the Head of School of its intention to carry out a Focused external review five weeks in advance. The ERS also explains the procedure and the specific quality standard/s the review will focus upon. Apart from informing educators, learners and parents about the purpose and structure of the Focused external review, the Head of School prepares specific documentation to be sent to the ERS within three weeks of the external review. An important part of this documentation is the Pre-External Review School Self-Evaluation, which is a reflective exercise compiled by the Head of School on how the school is performing in relation to the specific National Quality Standards. The Head of School disseminates ERS questionnaires, tailor-made on the focus of the review, with stakeholders.

Who carries out this review

A team that consists of ERS Education Officers and when required, external educational experts in the field, carries out the Focused external review. The team varies in number according to the size of the school community. One of the ERS Education Officers would take on the role of review leader.

How the review team develops its evaluation

The review team has three weeks to analyse the documentation provided by the Head of School as well as the outcomes of the pre-external review questionnaires before the external review visit. This enables the review team to identify lines of enquiry to be prioritised during the focused external review visit, which lasts between two to three days. The research

techniques used during the review visit include individual and group interviews, reviewing of school documents as well as observations of lessons, meetings and activities held at school. The team bases its in-depth evaluation on the triangulation of evidence gathered. Moreover, the team involves the SLT and other educators in an ongoing professional dialogue to further strengthen its evaluation.

Outcomes of the Review

Following its evaluation, the team briefs the SLT about the main conclusions on each of the National Quality Standards under review. The review leader formalises these conclusions in a report. The report aims to give the Head of School, the school community and education authorities feedback in a formative and developmental way about the school's performance or progress in relation to the identified National Quality Standards. It also aims to help the school community reflect on its practices and subsequently develop an action plan that leads to school improvement.

Once in possession of the report, the SLT and possibly educators devise a SMART post-review action plan aiming to address the recommendations highlighted in the report.

The review leader schedules a post-external review meeting with the school/college leaders within six weeks of the external review. During this meeting, the Head of School explains how the school intends to address the recommendations listed in the Focused external review report. The outcomes of the Focused external review and post-external review meeting are among those factors that determine the next external review model for the school.

Thematic review model

Why the ERS carries out this external review model

The main aim of the Thematic external review is to inform policy makers about the situation in educational institutions concerning national priorities and the outcomes of policy implementation, indicating potential ways forward. This review model is research focused, aligned with the national education agenda. Additionally, it serves the purpose of providing constructive feedback to individual schools regarding their progress in the reviewed theme. However, it's important to note that policymakers will receive a comprehensive report summarizing all findings across the review cycle, rather than individual school reports.

How schools are selected

Depending on the area being researched, a Thematic external review may be carried out

- In one or more sectors (state, church, independent), and
- Across the different levels of education (early years, junior years, middle years, secondary years) falling under the remit of the ERS; or
- In one or more of the levels; or
- In one or more year groups.

The sampling of schools takes place in a stratified random manner to make the sample as representative as possible. The ERS informs stakeholders about these decisions before a Thematic external review is carried out.

How the school prepares for this review

The ERS asks the selected schools to share the existing information and documentation they possess related to the focus of the thematic review. In such cases, the schools will be allocated reasonable time to collate and share this information and documentation. The ERS devises any research tools that might be needed to gather and analyse new data. In such cases the role of the educational institutions is to facilitate the collection of data.

Who carries out this review

Thematic external reviews are based on the focused external review model. A team that consists of ERS Education Officers and when required, external educational experts in the field, carries out the external review focusing on the theme in question. The team varies in number according to the size of the school community. One of the ERS Education Officers would take on the role of review leader.

How the review team develops its evaluation

In principle, the review team seeks to involve all the different stakeholders concerned and make use of multiple research methods to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Such decisions are taken at the planning stage, usually following the advice of area experts.

Outcomes of the Review

During external reviews that include lesson observations, reviewers provide class educators with verbal feedback on their practices. Such feedback contributes towards the educators' professional growth. At the end of the review, the review team provides the SLT with verbal feedback on the findings. These findings are recorded and later sent to the Head of School. Once the Thematic external review across schools is concluded, the ERS compiles a report based on the analysis of the findings for the policy makers and possibly, the public. As the report is intended for policy makers it includes a set of recommendations to guide future actions and influence decision-making processes. Care is taken not to disseminate SLT, educator or institution specific information in the report.

Follow-up review model

Why the ERS carries out this external review model

The main purpose of the Follow-Up external review is to validate the previous external review and to evaluate the progress made in the identified areas for improvement. The ERS uses this model to conclude, or otherwise, the external review process initiated through a Whole School or Focused external review.

How schools are selected

The selection of schools that will be evaluated through the Follow-Up external review model is based on one trigger, namely the outcomes of the previous Whole School or Focused external review report. The final selection of schools for this model is at the discretion of the Director DQSE.

How the school prepares for this review

The school prepares for this external review by addressing the required actions indicated in the Whole School or Focused external review report. The school's post-review action plan is a pivotal tool in achieving this objective. Schools are encouraged to implement the action plan, revising it as required to address the recommendations as effectively as possible.

Who carries out this review

The Follow-Up external review is led by the Assistant Director or the review leader of the previous external review and Education Officers from the ERS. Normally, the Education Officers involved would have been team members of the previous external review held at the school.

How the review team develops its evaluation

The Follow-Up external review consists of an unannounced visit spanning over one day. The review team gathers the data it needs for evaluation through different means. The Head of School explains how the school is addressing the previous external review report's recommendations and provides any supporting documentation as required. Reviewers conduct lesson observations and interviews with SLT members, educators and learners focusing on the recommendations of the previous external review report. The review team bases its evaluation on the triangulation of evidence gathered.

Outcomes of the Review

When requested, reviewers provide class educators with verbal feedback after lesson observations. Such feedback contributes towards the educators' professional growth. At the

end of the visit, the team holds a meeting with the Head of School and members of the SLT, if available, to share its conclusions on how well the school has tackled the recommendations of the previous external review. The review leader formalises these conclusions in a report. The report is sent to the Head of School, the Head of College Network (or equivalent) and the respective education authorities. The Head of School, after consultation with the Head of College Network or equivalent, may decide to disseminate the report with the rest of the school community.

The outcomes of the Follow-Up external review are among those factors that determine the next external review model for the school.

Procedure for lodging a complaint

Service providers, service users, stakeholders and the general public may lodge a complaint regarding the service provided by a school. A complainant should ideally initiate the complaint with the school authorities in order to seek redress.

Unresolved complaints may be directed to the DQSE by calling 25981400 or sending an email at licenses.dqse.meyr@gov.mt complete with supporting documentation that is of relevance to the complaint. All complaints will be dealt with in a confidential manner.

Necessary action is taken as necessary. An unannounced visit can be carried out by a review team to ensure that the complaint is addressed. A report is compiled by the investigating team and passed on to the DQSE management. The complainant and other stakeholders are informed about the main findings and outcomes and any action the centre is expected to take, if applicable.

All complaints received by the DQSE, the outcome of the investigation and any action taken, are logged in the Complaints Register kept by the DQSE.

List of key terms

Educational institution	Licensed schools, resource centres and learning support centres.
Educator	Heads of department, teachers, kindergarten educators and learning support educators.
Parent	The term refers to the biological or legal guardian of the learner attending the school (A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools, 2022, p.11).

Disclaimer

Any data that serves as supporting evidence will be retained by the DQSE for a period of two years in accordance with the directorate's Retention Policy and in line with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679.

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