

# American Academy of Forensic Sciences



# FEPAC

FORENSIC SCIENCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS  
ACCREDITATION COMMISSION

## POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

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ACCREDITATION COMMISSION**

**POLICIES & PROCEDURES**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 MISSION

The mission of the Forensic Science Education Programs Accreditation Commission (FEPAC) is to maintain and enhance the quality of forensic science education through a formal evaluation and accreditation system for college-level academic programs that lead to a baccalaureate or graduate degree.

## 1.2 PURPOSE

The purposes of FEPAC are to:

1. Use the National Institute of Justice Technical Working Group for Education and Training in Forensic Science (TWGED) curriculum guidelines to develop, implement, maintain, and enhance rigorous, consensus educational standards for undergraduate and graduate forensic science programs at accredited institutions of higher education;
2. Develop and to implement a set of well-defined procedures for evaluating forensic science programs against those standards; and
3. Encourage self-evaluation and continual improvement of forensic science education programs through the accreditation process.

## 1.3 HISTORY

The American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) was established in 1948 to promote education for and research in the forensic sciences; encourage the study, improve the practice, elevate the standards, and advance the cause of the forensic sciences; promote interdisciplinary communications; and plan, organize, and administer meetings, reports, and other projects for the stimulation and advancement of these and related purposes.

An assessment of forensic sciences published in 1999 by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), entitled, "Forensic Science: Review of Status and Needs", described the educational and training needs of the forensic science community as "immense." Among the recommendations contained in the report was the establishment of the following:

1. National standards for education in forensic sciences;
2. An independent, community-wide, consensus-building, standard-setting body such as a technical working group for education in forensic sciences;
3. An accreditation system for forensic science education programs.

The NIJ established the TWGED in 2001 for the purpose of recommending sample curricular guidelines for educational programs in forensic sciences. The results of TWGED's deliberations were delineated in a research report published in 2003, entitled "Education and Training in Forensic Sciences: A Guide for Forensic Science Laboratories, Educational Institutions, and Students."

Acknowledging the importance of an accreditation system for academic programs built on the foundation of TWGED, the AAFS in 2002 established an *ad hoc* committee, called Forensic Education Programs Accreditation Committee, to explore issues related to the development of such an accreditation system. In 2004, the Forensic Science Education Programs Accreditation Commission (FEPAC) became an official standing committee of the AAFS and awarded its first accreditation February 2004.

## 1.4 SCOPE OF ACCREDITATION

FEPAC promotes academic quality through the formal accreditation of forensic science programs in the United States and Canada. The FEPAC accreditation processes and policies employ rigorous, consensus standards assuring and advancing academic quality at accredited institutions.

1. FEPAC accredits forensic science education programs that lead to a bachelor's or master's degree in forensic science, or in a natural science with a forensic science concentration. FEPAC will also accredit bachelor's or master's degree programs with a digital evidence concentration.
2. An eligible forensic science program must be located in a regionally accredited institution of higher education that requires state, province, or equivalent approval.

To ensure the accreditation requirements are valid and relevant indicators of the quality of education, FEPAC reviews its Accreditation Standards and Policies & Procedures on an annual schedule. In addition, FEPAC Commissioners and On-Site Evaluators are trained on the various aspects of the accreditation process as a measure to promote reliability in application of the Standards. Education programs are also monitored through Annual Reports to ensure continuous compliance with quality measures.

## **1.5 EXPANSION OF THE SCOPE OF ACCREDITATION**

There may arise a need for FEPAC to expand the scope of forensic educational programs, which it accredits to include disciplines other than forensic science, natural science with a concentration in forensic science, digital forensics or computer science with a concentration in forensic science. FEPAC would first determine if there is sufficient demand among laboratories and programs to sustain the growth of the new educational discipline. Such an expansion would require a new set of curricular and other Standards, and very likely, the development of sub-committees (Working Groups) comprised of one member of FEPAC and others with expertise in the given profession. Members of the Working Groups will only offer accreditation recommendations for consideration by FEPAC.

Prior to embarking on any expansion of the scope of programs it accredits, FEPAC would first attempt to determine there is a sufficient number of viable, candidate education programs in the specialty area with interest in program accreditation. A sufficient number of programs would be enough to warrant FEPAC expansion as described below, and would generate sufficient revenue to support the effort.

Having identified an area of probable expansion of accreditation, FEPAC will convene a small group of specialists, both practitioners and academics, including at least one (1) current FEPAC Commissioner, to draft a set of accreditation Standards. When completed and reviewed by FEPAC, the Standards will be published and disseminated to programs with potential interest in accreditation. A calendar for the accreditation cycle will be established.

If there is sufficient interest to justify moving forward, FEPAC will appoint a working group ("sub-commission") of two (2) to four (4) persons to handle the accreditation for the specialty. FEPAC will reorganize itself to accommodate the working group(s) by itself becoming smaller. The "parent" Commission will, for the foreseeable future, not have fewer than six (6) members. One (1) parent FEPAC Commissioner will be a non-voting member of each Working Group. Working Group members will be considered full-fledged Commissioners, and will be nominated, selected, and appointed by FEPAC as is done currently. They will have terms of office just as FEPAC Commissioners do at present.

The specialty Working Group will handle the accreditation process for the given specialty in the same manner FEPAC currently handles accreditation of criminalistics programs. In the end, it will make a recommendation to the parent FEPAC, which will then have final authority in the accreditation decision.

## **2. ACCREDITATION COMMISSION**

### **2.1 AUTHORITY**

FEPAC is responsible for, and has final authority over, the Standards used for the evaluation of college and university forensic science programs for purposes of accreditation, judgments involving compliance with those Standards, selection of Commissioners, financial matters, and accreditation decisions.

### **2.2 COMPOSITION**

FEPAC is composed of eleven (11) Commissioners. Five (5) Commissioners are forensic science educators, five (5) are forensic science practitioners, one (1) is a representative of the public. All Commissioners (except the Public Member) must be either a Member or Fellow of the AAFS. Non-voting members shall include the Concordance Officer and the Accreditation Coordinator.

The forensic science educator must be a faculty member or an administrator at a college or university that offers a FEPAC accredited forensic science program.

It is desirable that the forensic science practitioner have one (1) or more of the following:

1. forensic lab management experience or supervisory experience in a large lab or in a longstanding capacity;
2. membership in the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD);
3. experience as a FEPAC On-Site Evaluator;
4. service in other capacities to AAFS and/or other forensic organizations;
5. involvement in hiring decisions in a forensic lab, or
6. involvement in training of new hires in a forensic lab.

No two (2) educators may be from the same institution, nor may any two (2) practitioners be from the same agency.

The representative of the public may not be:

1. an AAFS member;
2. an employee, member of the governing board, owner, or shareholder of, or consultant to, either a forensic science program or the institution in which the forensic science program is located;
3. a member of any trade association or membership organization that is related to, affiliated with, or associated with FEPAC; or
4. a spouse, parent, child, or sibling of any individual identified in (1), (2), or (3).

The FEPAC Chair may appoint committees to assist the Commission with its operational responsibilities and these committees may include non-voting members of the Commission.

### **2.3 SELECTION OF COMMISSIONERS**

FEPAC solicits nominations for positions on the Commission from its relevant constituencies, including forensic science programs, the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD), Members and Fellows of AAFS, regional forensic science organizations, forensic science certification bodies, and government agencies such as the NIJ, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), and the U.S. Department of Education. FEPAC reviews the list of candidates it receives and then selects the individual to serve on the Commission. FEPAC then informs the President of AAFS of the appointments.

## **2.4 CHAIR OF THE COMMISSION**

The Chair of the Commission is elected annually by the members of the Commission and must be either a forensic science educator or a forensic science practitioner. The new Chair shall take office on the last day of the AAFS Annual Meeting (February). The Chair may be re-elected.

## **2.5 TERMS OF OFFICE**

The term of office for all Commissioners is three (3) years, with appointments made on a staggered basis. After serving one (1) complete term, a Commissioner may be reappointed to a second three-year term. However, no Commissioner, other than the public member, may serve more than two (2) consecutive three-year terms. A Commissioner moving from educator to practitioner or practitioner to educator while serving FEPAC may complete the term in the position to which they were elected. The ten (10) individuals appointed by the President of AAFS in 2002 to be members of the Forensic Science Education Programs Committee served as the charter Commissioners of FEPAC from February 2002 until February 2005. The first Public Member was appointed to the Commission by the President of AAFS in February 2004.

## **2.6 VACANCIES**

If a Commissioner resigns from the Commission before the expiration of his or her appointed term, or is otherwise unable to serve the full three-year term, the Commission will select an interim Commissioner. FEPAC will provide the name of the Commissioner to the President of AAFS. At the appropriate time, if that individual is selected by the Commission, he or she may be appointed to their first regular term.

## **2.7 MEETINGS**

The Commission meets twice annually, usually in conjunction with the AAFS Annual Meeting and a mid-year meeting. The Chair gives at least sixty (60) days written notice to Commissioners of the time and place of these meetings. Any special meetings during the year that may be necessary to conduct the business of the Commission, which may include meetings held by teleconference or other means, may be held when a quorum can be established.

## **2.8 ATTENDANCE**

All Commissioners are expected to attend all Commission meetings. A Commissioner who fails to attend two (2) consecutive meetings without the approval of the Chair will be considered to have resigned from the Commission.

## **2.9 QUORUM**

A quorum consists of eight (8) Commissioners. There must be a quorum present for all votes on accreditation matters, including the establishment of Standards and the actual accreditation decisions regarding programs. No proxy voting is permitted.

## **2.10 ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT**

The Chair of the Commission, along with the AAFS leadership and staff, will appoint the Accreditation Coordinator. The Accreditation Coordinator is not a Commissioner.

The Accreditation Coordinator shall coordinate the administrative support for the Commission and work with FEPAC and the AAFS to ensure that FEPAC has adequate administrative staff and financial resources to carry out its accrediting responsibilities. As agreed upon by FEPAC and the AAFS, some of the administrative staff may be shared between FEPAC and the AAFS.

The Chair of the Commission shall assure compliance with all applicable memorandums of understanding (MOUs).

## **2.11 FISCAL POLICIES**

FEPAC will adhere to the fiscal policies of the AAFS as described in the AAFS Bylaws and Policy and Procedure Manual.

FEPAC sets the fee structure for its accreditation activities and may apply for and accept grants and other monies to further its accreditation activities.

The AAFS serves as the repository for all FEPAC accreditation monies, including all dues and fees collected from accredited programs and those programs applying to FEPAC for accreditation, as well as any grants awarded to FEPAC. However, all monies so collected by AAFS must be earmarked and used solely for FEPAC's activities. FEPAC prepares an annual operating budget and submits the budget to AAFS.

During the annual review of Standards, FEPAC will conduct a review to determine if the current financial and administrative resources available to FEPAC are sufficient in order for FEPAC to fulfill its accreditation mission.



### 3. ACCREDITATION PROCESS

#### 3.1 ELIGIBILITY

Refer to Standard 3.1 for eligibility requirements.

#### 3.2 INSTITUTIONAL APPLICATION (FEPAC FORM 5.1)

A forensic science program that wishes to obtain FEPAC accreditation must submit an application form with supporting documentation and application fee to the Office of the Accreditation Coordinator. The application must be signed by the chief executive officer of the institution housing the forensic science program or by an institutional administrator authorized to act on behalf of the chief executive officer on matters related to accreditation. The application will include the names and contact information of all individuals to be notified of FEPAC decisions regarding the program.

Degree programs may have more than one (1) pathway to completion, permitting students to focus on a sub-discipline within the degree. These pathways may be called concentrations, tracks, emphases, specializations, certificates, etc. FEPAC refers to any such sub-disciplinary pathway as a “concentration.”

FEPAC currently accredits programs with forensic science concentrations in Criminalistics (Standard 4.6), Biology (Standard 4.7), Chemistry (Standard 4.8), Digital Evidence (Standard 4.9), and Crime Scene Investigation (Standard 4.10) at the undergraduate level. Concentrations accredited at the graduate level in forensic science include Biology and/or Chemistry (Standard 5.3) and, Digital Evidence (Standard 5.4). One application for all concentrations is acceptable if submitted during the same accreditation yearly cycle. A program that chooses to seek accreditation for multiple concentrations in different cycle years will be required to submit separate applications. If a university has more than one concentration and the concentrations are in different departments with different program directors, then each will be required to submit a separate application. Separate applications are required for undergraduate and graduate programs.

Any program seeking accreditation that has concentrations outside of the scope of FEPAC must clearly distinguish in its publicity and advertising which concentrations within the degree are FEPAC accredited.

Only concentrations listed above offered as part of accredited programs at an institution are eligible for FEPAC accreditation. Concentrations offered as independent certificate programs, where students with degrees from other institutions may earn the certificate by completing the prescribed courses, are not eligible for accreditation. The content of a certificate program, when offered in conjunction with an existing B.S. in chemistry, biology, or digital forensic science, could result in the combination (of the certificate content plus the degree content) being accredited as a program. The “certificate” program offered as a stand-alone could not be accredited. Institutions in which such a situation prevails are required to be clear in their advertisement and publicity about this distinction.

If an accredited degree program starts a new concentration within its accredited degree program, a full description of that new concentration (and syllabi for new courses, if applicable), including how it fits together with the existing program and concentrations, must be submitted to FEPAC. This notification should be in the form of a “substantive change” notification, and should be included in the program’s next Annual Report. Depending on the scope and complexity of the change, FEPAC may, at its discretion:

1. notify the program the new concentration is approved (unconditionally or conditionally), and thus included within the existing accreditation; or
2. give the program a choice between

- A. requiring a site visit as soon as practicably possible, and before approval of the new concentration is considered; or
- B. advise the program to include the new concentration in its next regularly scheduled re-accreditation Self-Study.

Until the new concentration has been reviewed and accredited by FEPAC, the program must clearly distinguish in its publicity and advertising that the new concentration is not FEPAC accredited.

An application for accreditation may be submitted at any time prior to March 1 to be considered for the current accreditation cycle. After receiving a program's application and verifying that it is complete, the Accreditation Coordinator refers the application to the Commission for eligibility. Upon review of the application, the Commission will accept or recommend withdrawal of the application; the Accreditation Coordinator notifies the program director of the Commission's decision. The Accreditation Coordinator contacts the program director to discuss a timeline for submission of the program's self-study, the on-site visit, and subsequent review and decision by the Commission.

The program shall be evaluated for accreditation under the Standards in place on the date its application is submitted to FEPAC.

### **3.3 RENEWAL OF ACCREDITATION**

A program may be granted accreditation for a term not to exceed five (5) years. A program seeking renewal of accreditation must submit a new self-study and host another site visit within six (6) months prior to the expiration of the previously granted period of accreditation.

### **3.4 SELF-STUDY (FEPAC FORM 5.2)**

A forensic science program that seeks FEPAC initial accreditation, or re-accreditation, must conduct an in-depth self-study of its compliance with FEPAC's Accreditation Standards. The Self-Study will provide a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the program. It will examine all aspects of the educational program, including the curriculum and the program's success with respect to student achievement, as well as the faculty, academic and student support services, resources, facilities, and administration.

The completed Self-Study must be submitted in its entirety by July 15. No significant curricular or programmatic changes will be considered after this deadline.

The Self-Study will involve all of the program's relevant constituencies, e.g., administrators, faculty members, field supervisors, practicum coordinators, students, and graduates. Other constituencies, e.g., program advisory committees, employers of graduates, forensic science practitioners, may also play a role in the development of the Self-Study.

A guide for the completion of the self-study will be provided upon request.

### **3.5 SITE VISIT**

Two (2) Commissioners, an educator and practitioner, will review the program's Self-Study and provide a report to FEPAC prior to authorization for the site visit.

A forensic science program that seeks accreditation or re-accreditation must host a site visit. The purpose of the site visit is to verify the contents of the program's Self-Study and to determine compliance with FEPAC's Standards.

Site visits are normally two (2) days in length; however, the actual length of the visit is determined by FEPAC after taking into account the number and/or complexity of the programs to be evaluated.

The on-site team consists of at least two (2) members, a forensic science educator and a forensic science practitioner. Normally, the forensic science educator serves as chair of the team. In addition, an external observer may accompany the team with the permission of the program. Additional members may be appointed to the team if warranted by the number and/or complexity of the programs to be evaluated.

To be an On-Site Evaluator, an individual must be an AAFS Associate Member, Member, Fellow, or an individual appointed to serve based upon their qualifications and experience and selected by the Commission. In addition, the forensic science educator on the team must be a full-time faculty member or an administrator at a college or university that offers a forensic science program. The forensic science practitioner on the team must be employed in the field of forensic science, either as a scientist who is a member of ASCLD, or in some equivalent capacity within the profession of forensic science. (Per standard practice among accrediting agencies, On-Site Evaluator applicants may be eligible to serve as On-Site Evaluators for up to five (5) years following retirement.)

All eligible candidates selected to be On-Site Evaluators receive training on FEPAC Accreditation Standards, Policies & Procedures, and the accreditation process prior to serving on a team. All Evaluators also receive periodic retraining and updating on the FEPAC Accreditation Standards and Policies & Procedures.

No person may serve on an on-site team evaluating a forensic science program if he/she is employed by, or a graduate of, the institution that houses the forensic science program. All persons who serve on teams have the responsibility to notify FEPAC of any conflict of interest, or perception of a conflict of interest, which might exist with respect to a program being reviewed and to decline to serve on any team that visits the program if such a conflict exists.

FEPAC informs a program of the Evaluators it proposes to use as the on-site team at least two (2) months in advance of the site visit. The program has the right to request that a team member be replaced if the program believes that that person has a conflict of interest, or a perceived conflict of interest, in reviewing the program. The Commission will review the program's request and appoint another person to serve on the team if it is determined that a real or perceived conflict of interest exists.

During the site visit, team members typically interview faculty, administrators, students, graduates, field supervisors, practicum directors, and employers of graduates. They also review program records and supporting documentation and tour the facilities. In addition, Evaluators may observe some classes.

At the conclusion of the site visit, the team holds a closing meeting with the program director and any other individuals the program director may wish to have present. The team limits its oral comments to thanking the host institution and providing the next steps in the accreditation process. The team will not provide observations regarding the program's compliance with the FEPAC Standards. The team does not make a recommendation to the Commission regarding accreditation or offer an opinion to the program regarding the outcome of the accreditation process.

### **3.6 ON-SITE TEAM REPORT**

The on-site team forwards its written report to the Accreditation Coordinator no later than ten (10) calendar days following the site visit. The report addresses the strengths and weaknesses of the program, evidence of compliance or lack of compliance with each of the FEPAC Accreditation Standards, and its success with respect to student achievement.

### 3.7 PROGRAM RESPONSE

After administrative review of the on-site team report by a Commission appointed subcommittee, the Accreditation Coordinator forwards the report to the program and allows the program thirty (30) calendar days to respond in writing to the report.

### 3.8 COMMISSION DECISION

Prior to making an accreditation decision regarding a forensic science program, the Commission conducts its own in-depth analysis of the program's compliance with the FEPAC Accreditation Standards. At a minimum, this analysis consists of a review of the program's Self-Study, report of the on-site evaluation team, administrative subcommittee review, program's response to the team report, and records of any student complaints regarding the program.

In reaching its decision, the Commission also evaluates whether a program maintains clearly specified educational objectives that are consistent with its mission and appropriate in light of the degrees or certificates awarded, are successful in achieving its stated objectives, and maintains degree and certificate requirements that conform to commonly accepted standards. In all cases, FEPAC will clearly distinguish between recommendations for program improvement and actions to be taken by the program to achieve accreditation.

### 3.9 ACCREDITATION CATEGORIES

In making its accrediting decisions, the Commission may assign any of the following accreditation categories to a program:

1. **Accreditation**, signifying that the program meets all FEPAC Standards. This status may be awarded to programs seeking either initial or renewal of accreditation. The award of accreditation or re-accreditation is for a five (5) year period.
2. **Notice of Concern**, signifying the program, while it currently meets FEPAC Standards, is in danger of being found out of compliance with one or more Standards.
3. **Conditional Accreditation**, signifying that the Commission has identified some weakness(es) in the program that the program must correct within a time frame specified by the Commission. The time frame may not exceed two (2) years. This status may be assigned to programs seeking initial accreditation or reaccreditation.
4. **Probation**, signifying that the Commission has determined that an accredited program no longer meets one or more of the Standards and must take corrective action to come into compliance with the Standard(s) within a time frame specified by the Commission. The time frame may not exceed two (2) years. This status may only be assigned to currently accredited programs.
5. **Denial of Accreditation**, signifying that the Commission has determined that the program does not meet the Standards. This status may be assigned only to programs seeking initial accreditation.
6. **Revocation of Accreditation**, signifying that the Commission has determined that the program does not substantially meet the Standards. This status may be assigned only to accredited programs that are seeking renewal of accreditation or that have been determined, as the result of a complaint, the review of an Annual Report, or some other action during a period of accreditation, to be in substantial noncompliance with the Standards.

### **3.10 ENFORCEMENT OF STANDARDS AND POLICIES AND PROCEDURES**

If at any time FEPAC's review of a program under any FEPAC Standard indicates that the program is not in compliance with that Standard, FEPAC requires the program to take appropriate action to bring itself into compliance with FEPAC's Standards within a time period designated by FEPAC that does not exceed twenty-four (24) months. If the program does not bring itself into compliance within the specified period, FEPAC initiates immediate adverse action unless it determines that, for good cause, the period for achieving compliance will be extended.

If a program provides false or misleading information in any documentation to FEPAC, it will be subject to immediate sanctions.

### **3.11 ANNUAL REPORTS (FEPAC FORM 5.3)**

As a condition of continued accreditation, each accredited forensic science program must submit an Annual Report to FEPAC by December 1. If a program fails to submit the required Annual Report on time, it may be subject to sanctions such as being placed on conditional accreditation, probation, or revocation as appropriate. It is the program's responsibility to ensure the submitted report is received by FEPAC.

FEPAC reviews each program's Annual Report and takes follow-up action, as appropriate, if any information in the report calls into question the ability of the program to meet the FEPAC Accreditation Standards. Such action may include, but is not limited to, requesting an additional report from the program, conducting a special site visit to the program, placing the program on probation, or revoking the program's accreditation.

#### **3.11.1 PERFORMANCE DISCLOSURE**

Accredited programs are required to provide reliable information to the public on their websites regarding their performance. The information provided must include at least one measure of student achievement as determined by the institution or program and will be updated annually.

Examples of performance disclosure and student achievement, as prepared by the institution or program, may include aggregate data regarding:

1. Attrition and retention.
2. Graduation.
3. Licensure pass rates.
4. Job placement rates (as appropriate).
5. Employment advancement (as appropriate).
6. Acceptance into graduate programs.

The measures used by the program to inform the public about program performance must be listed on the Annual Report to FEPAC and easily accessible on the program's website.

### **3.12 SUBSTANTIVE CHANGE (FEPAC FORM 5.4)**

FEPAC requires any accredited program to notify FEPAC of any substantive change. The program must notify FEPAC within thirty (30) days of the change and must list the change on the next Annual Report. It is the responsibility of the program to ensure the substantive change information is received by FEPAC.

FEPAC defines substantive change to include any change that could adversely affect the accreditation status of the program. Examples may include:

1. Any change in the established mission or objectives of the program.
2. Any change in the regional accreditation status.
3. The addition of courses or programs that represent a significant departure, in either content or method of delivery, from those that were offered when FEPAC last evaluated the program.
4. The addition of courses or programs at a degree or credential level above that which is included in the program's current accreditation.
5. A change in the number of credit hours required for successful completion of a program.
6. A change in program director.

Upon receipt from a program of a substantive change, FEPAC reviews the change and takes whatever action it deems appropriate.

### **3.13 PUBLIC DISCLOSURE**

FEPAC will publically disclose all accreditation decisions and the basis for those decisions resulting in accreditation, probation, or revocation of accreditation. Programs will be given the opportunity to provide a public response related to the final decision. If a program elects to make a public disclosure of its accreditation status with FEPAC, the program must disclose that status accurately, including the specific academic or instructional programs covered by that status and the name, address, and telephone number of FEPAC. In institutions where multiple forensic science programs exist, the institution must accurately distinguish between programs that have achieved accredited status and those programs that have not.

If an accredited program releases incorrect or misleading information about its accreditation status with FEPAC, the contents of reports of on-site reviews of the program by FEPAC, or FEPAC's accrediting actions with respect to the program, FEPAC will direct the program to provide a correction of such information to the public. If the program fails to do so, FEPAC will take appropriate action, which may include placing the program on probation or withdrawing its accreditation. FEPAC will also provide for the public correction of the information itself.

## **4. OPERATING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES**

### **4.1 APPEAL PROCEDURE**

#### **4.1.1 SCOPE**

A program has the right to appeal a FEPAC accreditation decision. A program may appeal the FEPAC decision only on the grounds that FEPAC's decision was arbitrary, capricious, and/or not supported by the evidence available to the Commission on the date it made its decision. If a program files an appeal, any accreditation status held prior to the original FEPAC decision remains in effect until the appeal is heard and a final decision rendered.

#### **4.1.2 NOTICE OF INTENT TO APPEAL**

If a program wishes to appeal the FEPAC decision to deny or revoke accreditation, the program must submit a letter of intent, signed by the appropriate administrator of the institution, to FEPAC within fifteen (15) calendar days of receipt of the FEPAC decision. The program has an additional thirty (30) calendar days (up to forty-five (45) calendar days total) from the date of initial notification to submit to the Accreditation Coordinator:

1. the written grounds for its appeal, with supporting documentation. No documentation of circumstances, activities, or courses not in existence at the time of the Commission decision shall be allowed to be offered as a basis of the appeal,
2. payment of the non-refundable \$500 fee for the appeal, (Note: any additional expenses incurred by FEPAC and the Appeal Board will be borne by the appellant), and
3. written notification whether the program requests a meeting with the Appeal Board.  
(See 4.1.4)

If a program fails to submit a letter of intent to appeal and written grounds for an appeal within the specified time frames, the appeal will be dismissed and the original FEPAC decision becomes final.

After the program submits its written grounds for the appeal, the Accreditation Coordinator provides each member of the Appeal Board with a copy of the program's notice of intent and grounds for appeal, the Self-Study, the team report, the program's response to the team report, and any other written documents on which the decision was based, together with FEPAC's decision letter.

#### **4.1.3 APPEAL BOARD**

Once a letter of intent to appeal the decision is received by FEPAC, the Chair of the Commission shall appoint a three (3) person Appeal Board, including a Chair. The members of the Appeal Board are selected from forensic science educators and practitioners who have experience with the FEPAC accreditation process, have no conflicts of interest, and were not involved in any way in the original decision. The members may include current and former On-Site Evaluators as well as former Commissioners.

#### **4.1.4 REQUEST FOR MEETING**

At the time the documentation of the appeal is filed, the program may request either a telephone conference call or in-person meeting with the Appeal Board to make a presentation and explain the basis for the appeal. All expenses are the responsibility of the program. If the program has requested a meeting with the Appeal Board, the Chair of the Appeal Board shall contact the program within fifteen (15) days to schedule the meeting.

#### 4.1.5 CONDUCT OF THE MEETING

The program and FEPAC have the right to be represented by legal counsel during the meeting at their own expense. Due to the potential scope and nature of appeals, the Chair of the Appeal Board will moderate the meeting and ensure that the process and content of the meeting as determined by the Chair of the Appeal Board is maintained. During the meeting, FEPAC will be allowed an opportunity to explain its procedures and the basis of its decision. The Appeal Board will be responsible for maintaining minutes of the meeting and issuing a final report to the Commission.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Appeal Board shall convene in closed session, without representatives of the program or FEPAC present, to reach a ruling. The Appeal Board may either uphold the original FEPAC decision or remand the issue(s) to the Commission for further consideration. The Accreditation Coordinator is informed in writing of the Appeal Board's ruling within thirty (30) calendar days of the meeting.

If no presentation has been requested, the Appeal Board will schedule a meeting of its members at the earliest possible date.

#### 4.1.6 OUTCOMES

If the Appeal Board upholds the original FEPAC decision, the Accreditation Coordinator will notify the program in writing and the decision becomes final on the date of that letter.

If the Appeal Board remands the issue(s) to the Commission for further consideration, the Commission shall take the matter up at its next regular meeting or at a special meeting (if the next regular meeting is not scheduled to occur within the next thirty (30) days) to consider the action of the Appeal Board and the reasons for the remand. The Commission may make a final determination at that meeting or take other action as appropriate, based on the circumstances, before reaching a final determination. Within thirty (30) calendar days of making its final determination, the Accreditation Coordinator shall notify the program in writing of the Commission's decision.

### Appeal Timeline

#### Calendar Days from FEPAC Notification\*

#### Action

Calendar Days from FEPAC Notification*	Action
0	Notification of FEPAC decision on accreditation status
15	Program notifies FEPAC of intent to appeal; Appeal Board is appointed
45	Program provides FEPAC with written basis for appeal and all supporting documentation
60	If a meeting with the Appeal Board was requested, the Chair of the Appeal Board contacts the program to schedule a meeting
46-90	Appeal Board convenes and renders its ruling
76-120	Letter from Accreditation Coordinator of the Appeal Board ruling
>90	FEPAC meets or convenes special meeting to resolve Appeal Board rulings, if any



#### **4.1.7 MANNER OF COMMUNICATION**

Written communication regarding an appeal must be sent in a manner that confirms receipt (e.g., email, USPS certified mail Return Receipt Requested, FEDEX-type courier), and addressed to: FEPAC Accreditation Coordinator, American Academy of Forensic Sciences, 410 North 21<sup>st</sup> Street, Colorado Springs, CO 80904. All letters sent by FEPAC relating to these matters shall be in a manner that confirms receipt (e.g., email, USPS certified mail Return Receipt Requested, FEDEX-type couriers.)

#### **4.2 COMPLAINTS**

The policy of FEPAC is to review in a timely, fair, and equitable manner any complaint it receives against an accredited program that is related to FEPAC's Accreditation Standards and/or Policies & Procedures and to take follow-up action, as appropriate, including enforcement action, if necessary, based on the results of its review. Furthermore, FEPAC policy will review in a timely, fair, and equitable manner, and apply unbiased judgment to, any complaints against FEPAC and to take follow-up action, as appropriate, based on the results of its review.

##### **Complaints against Accredited Programs**

FEPAC considers all written, signed complaints it receives against accredited programs. Within fifteen (15) calendar days of receipt of such a complaint, FEPAC will send a letter to the complainant acknowledging receipt of the complaint and explaining the procedures for processing the complaint. Also within fifteen (15) calendar days of receipt of the complaint, FEPAC will forward a copy of the complaint to the program and requests that the program submit a written response to FEPAC within thirty (30) calendar days of the program's receipt of the complaint.

When FEPAC receives the program's response, it will conduct its own investigation of the complaint to determine if the program has violated any of FEPAC's Standards or policies. FEPAC will make every effort to complete its investigation as expeditiously as possible, and normally the investigation will be completed within thirty (30) calendar days. However, in certain circumstances more time may be necessary.

When FEPAC has completed its investigation, it will notify both the program and the complainant in writing of the results. If FEPAC determines that the program is not in compliance with its Standards or Policies, FEPAC will take appropriate action, which may include requesting a follow-up report from the program documenting that corrective action has been taken, probation, or taking steps to withdraw the program's accreditation. If FEPAC receives a complaint regarding an accredited program that the Commission deems unrelated to FEPAC Standards, or Policies and Procedures, the complaint is forwarded to the program director or appropriate institutional administrator. All formal complaints must be administered according to the Program's formal complaint process in compliance with FEPAC Standard 3.8.

If FEPAC receives an anonymous complaint about a program, or an oral complaint that the complainant refuses to put into writing, FEPAC will take whatever action it deems appropriate in light of the seriousness of the complaint.

##### **Complaints against FEPAC**

FEPAC shall consider all substantive, written, signed complaints it receives against the Commission or its administrative staff. Within fifteen (15) calendar days of receipt of such a complaint, the Chair of the Commission will send a letter to the complainant acknowledging receipt of the complaint and explaining the complaint procedures. Also, within fifteen (15) days, the Chair will, if necessary, will appoint a three (3) person panel of *non-FEPAC members* to investigate and properly resolve the complaint. Members of the panel will be selected from

forensic science educators and practitioners who have experience with the accreditation process but were not involved in any aspect of the complaint. They may include current and former On-Site Evaluators, as well as former Commissioners. The panel will have thirty (30) calendar days to complete its investigation of the complaint, although under certain circumstances it may be allowed more than thirty (30) days to complete the investigation.

When the investigation is completed, the panel will report its findings in writing to the complainant and the Commission. If the panel determines that there is merit to the complaint, it will recommend that the Commission take appropriate action. The Commission will consider the panel's recommendations at its next regularly scheduled meeting, or, if such a meeting is not scheduled to take place within the next two (2) months, during a conference call within two (2) months of the Commission's receipt of the panel's recommendation. The Commission will inform both the complainant and the panel of all actions it has taken or plans to take based on the panel's recommendation.

If FEPAC receives an anonymous complaint about the Commission or its administrative staff, the Chair will take whatever action he or she deems appropriate in light of the seriousness of the complaint.

#### **4.3 CONFIDENTIALITY (FEPAC FORM 5.8)**

All individuals participating in the FEPAC accreditation process, including but not limited to On-Site Evaluators, Commissioners, consultants, FEPAC staff members, and anyone serving as a FEPAC representative must sign a confidentiality agreement. These individuals are prohibited from discussing any information they learn about a program through the accrediting process with anyone other than On-Site Evaluators, Commissioners, FEPAC staff, and program representatives.

#### **4.4 CONFLICT OF INTEREST (FEPAC FORMS 5.6 & 5.7)**

All individuals participating in the FEPAC accreditation process, including but not limited to On-Site Evaluators, Commissioners, consultants, FEPAC staff members, and anyone serving as a FEPAC representative, have an obligation to avoid real or perceived conflicts of interest in carrying out their accrediting responsibilities. A conflict of interest is defined as any relationship with a FEPAC accredited program, or a program that is seeking FEPAC accreditation, that could interfere with the ability of the individual to exercise objectivity in the accreditation process. A perceived conflict of interest is any such relationship that could be perceived as interfering with the individual's ability to exercise objectivity.

Circumstances that may create a real or perceived conflict of interest, but are not limited to, include situations in which an individual:

1. is or has been employed by the institution that houses the program that is seeking, or already holds, FEPAC accreditation, or has a close relative (e.g., spouse, parent, child, or sibling) who is so employed;
2. is or has been a consultant to the program or the institution that houses the program, regardless of compensation, or has a close relative who is, or has been, such a consultant, including program development activities or matters regarding FEPAC accreditation;
3. has a monetary or personal interest in the outcome of the accreditation decision regarding the program;
4. is a graduate of the institution that houses the program; or
5. has a close personal relationship with an individual or individuals involved with the institution or program.

An On-Site Evaluator must not accept appointment to a team evaluating a program if there is a real or perceived conflict of interest with that person's participation in the accreditation process. When accepting appointment to a team, an On-Site Evaluator must sign a conflict of interest statement (FEPAC Form 5.6) attesting to the fact that he or she has no real or perceived conflict of interest with the program being reviewed.

A Commissioner who has a real or perceived conflict of interest with a program being reviewed must refrain from participating in the discussion and voting on that program, and the minutes of the Commission meeting must clearly reflect that that Commissioner was recused from the vote. Once a year, all Commissioners must sign a conflict of interest statement (FEPAC Form 5.7) identifying all programs for which they might have a real or perceived conflict of interest. The Chair of the Commission reminds Commissioners at the beginning of each meeting of their responsibilities to avoid all real and perceived conflicts of interest.

#### **4.5 DUE PROCESS**

FEPAC will allow a program a reasonable period of time to comply with any requests it makes of the program to provide FEPAC with information and documents.

FEPAC will notify a program in writing of any adverse action to deny or revoke accreditation or an action to place the program on probation. The notice describes the basis for the action.

FEPAC will permit a program the opportunity to appeal an adverse action to deny or revoke accreditation or an action to place the program on probation or conditional status and the right to be represented by counsel during that appeal. Notice of the right to appeal and a copy of the appeal procedure are included with the letter FEPAC sends to the program notifying it of FEPAC's decision to deny or revoke accreditation or place the program on probation or conditional status. Any accreditation status the program had prior to the Commission's decision to deny or revoke accreditation or place the program on probation or conditional status remains in effect until the appeal process is complete.

FEPAC will notify the program in writing of the result of its appeal and the basis for that result.

#### **4.6 PREPARING A SELF-STUDY (FEPAC FORM 5.2)**

The Self-Study serves as a major source of information about the program seeking accreditation for FEPAC. One of the purposes of the visit conducted by the FEPAC evaluation team is to verify the contents of the program's Self-Study.

The Self-Study will be clear and concise and written in a manner that allows individuals unfamiliar with the program to develop a clear understanding of the environment in which the program operates, the nature of the learning experiences the program provides students, and the program's assessment of its effectiveness in educating students.

The program's Self-Study follows the structure of FEPAC's Standards; i.e., for each Standard, the program provides a brief narrative describing how it believes it complies with the Standard. (The specific format for the Self-Study may be found on the FEPAC website – <https://www.aafs.org/FEPAC> at the link "Accreditation".)

To minimize the burden on programs in preparing a Self-Study, complete with all the supporting materials necessary to provide evidence of the program's compliance with FEPAC's Standards, FEPAC encourages programs to use existing institutional or departmental data, materials, reports, studies, and policies as documentation. Programs may also find it helpful to use, or simply update, documents that were prepared in conjunction with the institution's most recent review for re-accreditation.

#### **4.7 NOTIFICATION OF ACCREDITING DECISIONS**

Within thirty (30) days of making its accrediting decisions, FEPAC will provide written notice of the following types of decisions to the appropriate accrediting agencies and the public:

1. A decision to award initial accreditation to a program.
2. A decision to renew a program's accreditation.
3. A decision to place a program on probation or conditional accreditation.
4. A final decision to deny or revoke the accreditation of a program.

For all decisions listed under (1), (2), (3) and (4), FEPAC provides written notice to the appropriate accrediting agencies at the same time it notifies the program and makes the information available to the public on its website at least fourteen (14) calendar days after its notice to the program. Accreditation decisions will be placed on the FEPAC website for a period of not less than sixty (60) days, not to exceed one (1) year. The basis for adverse decisions will also be posted. Accreditation decisions involving sanctions will be posted publicly for a period of not less than sixty (60) days or until the sanctions are resolved.

For all decisions listed under (1), (2), (3) and (4), FEPAC makes available upon written request to the appropriate accrediting agencies and the public, no later than sixty (60) days after the decision, a brief statement summarizing the reasons for FEPAC's decision and the comments, if any, that the affected program may wish to make with regard to that decision.

Finally, FEPAC notifies the appropriate accrediting agencies, and, upon request, the public if an accredited program;

1. decides to withdraw voluntarily from accreditation, within thirty (30) days of receiving notification from the program that it is withdrawing voluntarily from accreditation; or,
2. lets accreditation lapse within thirty (30) days of the date on which accreditation lapses.

#### **4.8 TEACH OUT POLICY**

In the event that the accreditation status of a program is revoked or the program voluntarily withdraws from accreditation, FEPAC requires the program to submit a "Teach-Out" plan within thirty (30) days that provides for equitable treatment of the students that were enrolled in the program while it was accredited. This plan must include:

1. disclosure to the students in the program and potential applicants,
2. a detailed explanation of the equitable treatment plan for current students, and
3. signed copies of any teach-out agreements between institutions to assist (if applicable).

Acceptable teach-out plans may include, but are not limited to, agreements with other accredited institutions to transfer appropriately qualified students, restoration of pre-revocation curriculum or faculty for the duration of the teach-out plan, or other suitable arrangements as deemed by the Commission.

Failure to submit an acceptable teach-out plan will be reported to the appropriate regional accrediting bodies and will preclude future FEPAC accreditation applications from the program or institution for a period of five (5) years.

#### **4.9 RECORDS MAINTENANCE**

FEPAC maintains complete, accurate, and secure records of its last two (2) accreditation reviews of each

program, including on-site evaluation team reports, the program's responses to on-site reports, any periodic review reports that FEPAC may require of accredited programs, any reports of special reviews that FEPAC may conduct between regular reviews, and a copy of all Self-Studies. FEPAC also maintains complete, accurate, and secure records of all its decisions regarding the accreditation of any program, including all correspondence that is significantly related to those decisions.

#### **4.10 REGARD FOR DECISIONS OF STATES AND OTHER ACCREDITING AGENCIES**

FEPAC does not accredit a forensic science program unless the institution housing the program is legally authorized under applicable state law to provide a program of education beyond the secondary level and to award degrees.

FEPAC does not normally grant initial or renewed accreditation to a forensic science program if FEPAC has reasonable cause to believe that the institution housing the program is the subject of any of the following:

1. A pending or final action brought by a state agency to suspend, revoke, withdraw, or terminate the institution's legal authority to provide postsecondary education in the state,
2. A decision by a recognized agency to deny accreditation or pre-accreditation,
3. A pending or final action brought by a recognized accrediting agency to suspend, revoke, withdraw, or terminate the institution's accreditation or pre-accreditation, or
4. Probation or an equivalent status imposed by a recognized agency.

Should FEPAC grant accreditation to a program housed in an institution that meets any condition described in (1) through (4), FEPAC will provide the program, within thirty (30) days of its action, a thorough and reasonable explanation, consistent with its Standards, why the action of the other body does not preclude FEPAC's grant of accreditation.

If FEPAC learns that an institution that houses a program it accredits is the subject of an adverse action by another recognized accrediting agency or has been placed on probation or an equivalent status by another recognized agency, FEPAC will take prompt action to review its accreditation of the program to determine if it should also take adverse action or place the program on probation.

Upon written request, FEPAC may share with other appropriate accrediting agencies and state approval agencies information about the accreditation status of any program and any adverse actions it has taken against an accredited program.

Finally, FEPAC will work with academic institutions seeking accreditation to resolve any conflict between state or local laws governing the institution and accreditation Standards.

#### **4.11 REVIEW OF STANDARDS**

It is FEPAC policy to conduct ongoing and comprehensive reviews of its accreditation Standards to verify that they are adequate to evaluate educational quality and are relevant to the educational and training needs of students seeking a career in forensic science. FEPAC uses a combination of annual reviews, longer-term reviews, and special reviews to accomplish this task. The various reviews are described below:

##### **Annual Review of the Standards**

Once a year, the Commission reviews Standards to determine if it is adequate to evaluate the quality of forensic science programs. The implications of changes in the field of forensic science and the practices of FEPAC accredited programs of the Standards are routinely considered during these formal reviews, as are changes

designed either to improve program quality or to update the language of the Standards. Also considered are the results of the other FEPAC reviews and any other activities FEPAC routinely conducts during the year that provide input about the effectiveness of the Standards. These activities typically include discussions with FEPAC accredited programs during the American Academy of Forensic Sciences Annual Meeting and during various workshops FEPAC conducts for its programs, reviews of any complaints received during the year that suggest problems with the Standards, etc. If problems are found with any of the Standards during this formal review, proposals for new or revised Standards are developed, sent out for comment to the relevant constituencies, and voted on at a subsequent Commission meeting, after analyses of the comments received.

Through this formal review of individual Standards that takes place annually, the Commission may add new Standards, revise existing ones, and eliminate those that it determines are outdated or no longer appropriate to the assessment of program quality.

### **Informal Review of the Standards After Each Commission Meeting**

In addition to the formal, structured review of specific Standards described in the previous section and that takes place annually during a Commission meeting, there are less formal *ad hoc* reviews of the Standards by Commissioners that take place at the end of each Commission meeting. The purpose of these reviews, based on the application of the Standards to the specific programs the Commission considered during its meeting, is to determine if there are problems with any of the Standards that require further investigation and possible modification.

Any proposals for changes to the Standards that result from this informal review process are subject to the usual FEPAC procedures for revisions to the Standards (described in Section 4.11).

### **Review of the Standards by Programs and On-Site Evaluators**

FEPAC will survey On-Site Evaluators (FEPAC Form 5.11) after each site visit to gain any insights they might have about the Standards, their effectiveness in evaluating educational quality, their relevance to the education and training needs of students, etc.

In a similar fashion, FEPAC will survey programs (FEPAC Form 5.12) about their perceptions of the adequacy and relevance of the Standards. FEPAC schedules this activity immediately after each site visit because it recognizes that programs that have recently prepared a Self-Study and have undergone an on-site review have a particularly keen insight into the relevance of the Standards, the effectiveness of their application during the Self-Study and site visit, etc.

The information obtained from both of these activities will be provided to the Commission for use during the Commission's annual structured review of the Standards.

### **Review of Student Outcomes**

An important measure of the effectiveness of the FEPAC Standards, both individually and as a whole, is the student learning outcomes. Two (2) tools FEPAC uses to measure student outcomes are the retention rate and the job placement rate of students who are enrolled in a FEPAC accredited program, as reported by programs on their Annual Report form.

The information obtained from this activity will be provided to the Commission for use during the Commission's annual structured review of the Standards.

## **Long-Term Review of the Standards**

Every five (5) years, the Commission will conduct longer-term reviews of the Standards, the primary purpose of which is to determine if the current Standards, when viewed as a whole and individually, are adequate to evaluate the quality of forensic science education programs and relevant to the education and training needs of students.

Usually, when a Standard is being reviewed as part of this process, there is a general discussion at the outset by members of the Commission and FEPAC's relevant constituencies about what issues are important to consider in evaluating quality in that area. This is followed by a detailed examination of the Standards to determine if they adequately address all of the issues identified; and if not, then proposals are developed to modify or, if necessary, to replace one or more Standards or to add additional Standards.

## **Review of Special Issues by Task Forces and Other Groups**

Periodically, the Commission will hold meetings with relevant constituencies to address special issues. After a general discussion of the issues, participants review the relevant FEPAC Standards and assess their viability as measures of quality related to the issue.

### **4.12 REVISION OF STANDARDS**

At any point during its systematic program of review of its Standards, or at any other time, if FEPAC determines that it needs to make changes to its Standards, it initiates action within 12 months to make the changes, and it completes that action within a reasonable period of time. Before finalizing any changes to the Standards, FEPAC provides notice, with an official "Call for Comments," to all of its relevant constituencies, and other parties, including the AAFS Board of Directors, who have made their interest known to FEPAC, of the changes it proposes to make, gives its constituencies and other interested parties adequate opportunity to comment on the proposed changes, and takes into account any comments on the proposed changes submitted in a timely manner by the relevant constituencies and by other interested parties.

### **4.13 PUBLIC DISCLOSURE**

FEPAC maintains and makes available to the public, upon request, written materials describing:

1. Each type of accreditation it grants.
2. The procedures that programs must follow in applying for accreditation.
3. The Standards and procedures it uses to determine whether to grant accreditation, conditional accreditation, probation, denial, or revocation.
4. The programs that FEPAC currently accredits and, for each program, the year FEPAC will next review or reconsider it for accreditation.
5. The names, academic and professional qualifications, and relevant employment and organizational affiliations of the Commission and FEPAC's principal administrative staff.

Whenever FEPAC is considering a program for accreditation, FEPAC provides an opportunity for third-party comment ("Call for Comments") concerning the program's qualifications for accreditation prior to the site visit. FEPAC provides this opportunity by posting notice on its web site.

## 5. FORMS

- 5.1 Institutional Application for Accreditation
  - 5.1.1 Application for Initial Accreditation
  - 5.1.2 Application for Institutional Digital Forensic Accreditation
- 5.2 Self-Study
- 5.3 Annual Report
- 5.4 Application for Approval of a Substantive Change
- 5.5 Application to be an On-Site Evaluator
- 5.6 On-Site Evaluator Conflict of Interest Form
  - 5.6.1 Institution Conflict of Interest Form
- 5.7 Commissioner Conflict of Interest Form
- 5.8 Confidentiality Agreement
- 5.11 On-Site Evaluator Survey
- 5.12 Program Post On-Site Visit Survey



## 6. DUES AND FEES

The current FEPAC dues and fees are:

- \$1,500.00 Application Fee for initial accreditation or reaccreditation.
- \$2,500.00 Self-Study Fee for initial accreditation or reaccreditation.
- \$1,750.00 Annual Maintenance Fee for first program or track or concentration.
- \$1,000.00 Annual Maintenance Fee for each additional track or concentration.
- \$2,500.00 On-Site Evaluation Fee for team of two (2) on-site evaluators within the contiguous United States.
- \$1,000.00 On-Site Evaluation Fee for each additional on-site evaluator when needed  
If the program is outside the contiguous United States, the on-site fee will be equal to actual expenses.
- \$500.00 Appeal Request Fee. The program will also be responsible for any additional costs incurred as a result of the appeal process.
- \$100.00 Late Fee. Any required fees and/or documentation that are received after the due date will be subject to a \$100 late fee per occurrence.

The expenses of the site visit and any appeal are the responsibility of the academic program. If a site visit is called for by FEPAC, the cost will be borne by FEPAC. If a special site visit is requested by the program/institution and approved by FEPAC, the actual expenses will be borne by the institution.

Except as expressly set forth herein, all fees payable are non-refundable.