

The Self-Evaluation Process

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How many times has it been said?

'the most valuable part of the audit was the self-evaluation process'

'we did it primarily for ourselves, not for the needs of the external validation process'

And have we heard . . . ?

The self-evaluation was done by a small group.
They did what needed to be done.
They did the right presentation and played the
game well.

The rest of us ignored it!

. . . I hear we passed the audit?

Your:

- Expectations
- Needs
- Desired outcomes?

Objectives of the Workshop

From the perspectives of HE institutions and external quality monitoring and assurance bodies:

1. Identify, understand and assess various options for designing and conducting an effective self-evaluation
2. Discuss some common issues and problems that can be encountered in a self-evaluation process
3. Share the experience and expertise of workshop participants in conducting and assessing self-evaluations in different organisational contexts

Workshop Process

- Presentation of general concepts and principles
- Small group discussion and report back
- Afternoon tea
- Case example: The University of Auckland
- Self-evaluation strategies
- Plenary discussion
- Concluding questions and comments

Terminology

'Self-evaluation' wears many hats:

- Self-review
- Self-appraisal
- Self-audit
- Self-study etc.

And the focus / catalyst of the self-evaluation varies, e.g.,

- Unit-level, activity-focussed or institutional-level review
- Internal / external validation

Where does self-evaluation 'fit' in a typical audit or review process?

- Terms of reference
- External validation panel
- Institutional / unit objectives related to the audit
 - *The self-evaluation / self-review process*
 - The self-evaluation (performance/evidence) portfolio
 - Panel visit
 - Panel findings (report)
 - Feedback / follow-up / implementation

Self-evaluation can therefore be an 'event'

But:

*Where does self-evaluation 'fit' into
ongoing quality assurance and
enhancement?*

The self-evaluation process – Some external quality agency views (1)

New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU):

- Starting points:
 - Institutional objectives
 - Existing QA and QE programmes

- Questions to be addressed include:
 - What are the internal quality procedures?
 - Are they appropriate? Are they effective?
 - How do we know?

- How to conduct the self-evaluation:
 - Senior-level leadership
 - Broad participation and ownership

- Outputs:
 - Evidence-based institutional self-judgements about QA effectiveness
 - Plans for improvements

- Benefits: quality maintenance and enhancement

The self-evaluation process – Some external quality agency views (2)

Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA):

- No single model for self-evaluation
- Self-evaluation is an essential feature of the quality system, regardless of external audit considerations
- Should be designed principally for internal needs

Merits for the institution include:

- Improvements in self-learning
- Articulates relationships between internal self-judgements and national / international standards

Why is self-evaluation useful?

- Re-assess QA processes and activities, and assess their suitability in relation to objectives
- Better understanding of group contributions to organisational objectives
- Increase networking / communication concerning quality and good practices
- Compels looking into the 'too-hard' basket
- Increase organisational learning
- Identify areas for improvements, priorities

Self-evaluation and the 'learning organisation'

A self-evaluation process can be used strategically to encourage and support:

- Organisational innovation and discovery
- Team-building
- 'Across-the-silos' exchanges and communication
- Staff taking responsibility
- Staff professional development

→ *Are risk-taking and learning from mistakes encouraged?*

Why can self-evaluation be problematic?

Among other reasons cited:

- Extra workload
- Cost
- Compels looking into the 'too-hard' basket
- Few lasting benefits
- Organisational cynicism

Data sources and use

Data for a self-evaluation can include:

- Regular quality monitoring and assurance data
- Reports from other periodic internal and external reviews, e.g., departmental reviews, professional accreditations
- Specially-commissioned studies
- Data/ideas sourced from other performance portfolios and audit reports – the value of looking at other institutions?

- 'Data' collected in a self-evaluation is not automatically organisational knowledge and guides to improvement
- Must be a translation exercise, deliberately designed

Self-evaluation: dimensions to consider

- Quality systems Established ←-----→ In process
- Experience with audits Extensive ←-----→ Little
- Self-review nature Ongoing process ←-----→ An event
- Self-review focus Enhancement ←-----→ Assurance
- Existing org. structures Close links ←-----→ Few links
- Availability of data Quantitative ←-----→ Qualitative
- Stakeholder engagement Broad/high ←-----→ Narrow/low
- Internal value-added High ←-----→ Low

Generic self-evaluation questions (1)

For a specific organisational objective, e.g., high quality teaching:

- What quality-related actions are we taking?
- Why these actions and not others?
- Are there KPIs to verify effectiveness of the actions?
- Are they effective?
- What happens in consequence (who does what with what)?
- How do we know if we are achieving the objective (measurable outcomes)?
- What needs to be improved and how?

Generic self-evaluation questions (2)

For a specific quality process/procedure, e.g., student evaluations of teaching:

- What are the main steps in the process?
- Who is involved, who is responsible (at various stages)?
- How is the process implemented?
- Associated / required documentation?
- Monitoring effectiveness of the process, e.g., KPIs?
- Analysis / feedback loops to determine strengths / weaknesses and plan for improvement?

Mock or Trial Audits

- Reinforces the self-evaluation process and the institutional quality system?
- Helps further institutional communication of new knowledge, best practice and weaknesses to be addressed?
- A pre-submission check on the draft performance portfolio?
- A pre-submission check on progress made during self-evaluation?
- A one-off training or coaching of interviewees for the 'real thing'?
- A risk-free way of seeing how people react to external questions?

Discussion Issue 1

Can external quality oversight bodies assist higher education institutions in the design and conduct of their self-evaluations, and if so, how?

Discussion Issue 2

It is often said that the breadth and depth of 'buy-in' to the self-evaluation process is a critical element to its success.

What strategies and techniques can be used to create and maintain involvement of

- senior management
- staff
- students
- external stakeholders etc

in the self-evaluation process?

Discussion Issue 3

The bad news: Your institutional self-evaluation has revealed that the university policy on student course evaluations is not being followed consistently in all teaching units. Policy demands that all new courses be evaluated in each of their first 2 years, that established courses be evaluated every 3 years, and that there is student feedback. Some courses are never evaluated; others are evaluated annually. The evaluations processing unit is overwhelmed, and the Student Association has petitioned the Vice-Chancellor.

The good news: The audit portfolio has yet to be drafted.

As one of the co-ordinators of the self-evaluation process:

- What do you do?
- Who is involved?
- When do you do it?

The University of Auckland's self-evaluation process (2003-2004) – key elements

Audit focus: teaching and learning

- teaching quality
- programme delivery
- achievement of learning outcomes

The University:

- a devolved institution, both organisationally and culturally
- 7 faculties, 70 teaching units
- no pre-audit consolidated overview of teaching and learning

Leadership and organisation of the self-evaluation:

- Working Party of 6, including 3 'theme leaders' drawn from senior respected academics in the teaching and learning area
- Teaching and Learning Quality Committee as co-ordinator
- TLQ faculty representatives acted as faculty audit co-ordinators, with defined responsibilities (e.g., staff awareness and communication, information collection)

Initial steps in the self-evaluation – what we did

- To start, obtain an overview and 'feel' for the self-evaluation through small-group brainstorming
- Set reasonable parameters and objectives – it's not organisational revolution!
- Plan the process extensively at the outset (cultural assumption: limited number of chances to engage academic staff in the post-Performance Based Research Fund era)
- Translate formal terms of reference where necessary into more relevant and accessible language for staff
- Brief staff early on
- Keep the overall tone positive – an opportunity to focus on achievements, good practices and aspects that needed further work (not compliance)

Use of self-assessments

- self-assessment questionnaires/checklists – required formal feedback from faculties and departments -- benchmarks linked to university objectives / policies and audit terms of reference
- self-assessment 'check and assure' list to individual academic staff – no feedback required

Purposes:

- increase awareness
- document current practice and gather evidence
- identify recent improvements and good practice
- identify problems / areas of concern

Analysis of self-assessments and feedback to faculties and departments:

→ 'institutional to-do shortlist of improvements' (relating the particular to the general)

Other features of the self-evaluation

- Commissioning of small number of targeted reviews in areas of known weakness
- Ongoing dialogue with AAU Director and feedback into process
- Students: use of existing mechanisms (Staff-Student Consultative Committees); student reference group
- Dialogue with Council, as governance body
- Very careful consideration of commitments to enhancement
- Drafting and re-drafting of self-evaluation portfolio; sign-off by Faculty Deans

When things don't measure up – what to do?

Strategy 1:

- Use the collegial 'yellow card'
- Give them a better idea and a respected fellow-traveller who has experience with it

Strategy 2:

- Improve things quickly – pick the 'doables'

Strategy 3:

- Can't improve quickly? – identify as improvement/enhancement to be done

Other strategies?

Some challenges and dilemmas

- What to do when the evidence is that policy is not being put into practice as it was envisaged, and impacts are not institution-wide – change the practices, and / or change the policy?
- With at-times complex issues, how do we identify specific solutions and improvements?
- In a devolved institution the 'how do we know' question often leads to a protracted search for appropriate evidence – how much effort?
- How do we move from surface organisational learning to deeper organisational learning and change?

The unexpected does happen

- Self-assessment process became 'owned' in some departments and was used as a lever to initiate group discussions concerning quality
- The planned 'road map' for the self-evaluation evolved --- we learned and re-adjusted the process as we went along

What might we do differently the next time?

- Start even earlier
- Tougher self-questioning in some areas
- Greater use of the 'yellow card' approach
- More use of focus groups
- More time for dialogue and feedback on draft portfolio
- More prioritisation of enhancement initiatives

Some self-evaluation strategies: strengths and weaknesses?

Strategy 1:

- A small central group 'maps' the quality system
- The mapping is circulated for comment, confirmation that this reflects what particular units do, authenticity and comprehensiveness, processes that are followed
- The exercise looks for gaps, inaccuracies, inconsistencies, added dimensions and details, complications, good practices
- The goal is progressive refinement of the self-evaluation portfolio

Strategy 2

- Based on the audit terms of reference, conduct sequential mini-audits throughout the organisation to assess QA processes and performance
- Report results/recommendations back to a central point.

Strategy 3

- Use a standardised external framework to help guide the self-evaluation
- e.g., the Baldrige 'Education Criteria for Performance Excellence'

Strategy 4

- Start informally, using guided consultations with staff, students, senior management etc. concerning views on what works well, evidence of impact, what needs to be improved, examples of good practice, practical suggestions for improvement etc
- Progress to more formal data collection and consideration, e.g., 'think tanks' or project groups on specific issues, surveys/interviews/discussions on specific issues, knowledgeable reference groups, etc
- Triangulate information from different sources

Strategy 5

- Use an external facilitator / consultant to plan and guide the self-evaluation process
- Alternatively, invite an external auditor to review the data and outcomes of self-evaluation, prior to drafting of the evidence portfolio

Strategy 6

- Divide the self-evaluation into sections, with a small group responsible for each section
- Each group conducts a self-evaluation, drafts an analysis and recommendations
- Group reports are forwarded to a central analysis / editorial team for challenging, re-drafting, consistency

Discussion Issue 4

On what bases should the effectiveness and success of a self-evaluation be judged?

From the perspectives of:

- External quality assurance bodies
- The higher education institution
- Staff of the institution

Some concluding questions (1)

The process:

- Should a distinction be made between self-evaluation for internal use, and self-evaluation for external consumption?
- How do we avoid letting the self-evaluation process result in description (what we do) at the expense of analysis (how well do we do it)?
- Is self-evaluation concerned with the mechanics of quality assurance and enhancement, and/or should it be understood as an exercise in changing or advancing organisational cultures?
- Is 'performing' and 'playing the game' solely confined to the external audit, or is it an integral part of internal self-evaluation?

Some concluding questions (2)

The workload:

- What is the burden of self-evaluation work on front-line staff? Is 'burden' the appropriate way to portray this?
- What balance should be sought in self-evaluation between specially-produced documents for external auditors, and reliance on what is already used for internal purposes?

The impacts and effects:

- Does self-evaluation have anything other than short-term effects?
- To have longer-term effects, must internal self-evaluation always be twinned with external monitoring and validation?

Some concluding questions (3)

The links:

- Where self-evaluation is linked to funding, does this change the self-evaluation process?
- What are the risks and rewards of revealing weaknesses publicly? (particularly in circumstances where strengths are rewarded externally and resources are not allocated to improving weaknesses)