

Different Approaches to QA and Their Impact on Efficiency, Effectiveness and Sustainability

A Self Assessment Approach to Quality Assurance

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ABSTRACT

During 2006 the New Zealand Government announced significant changes to the nature of quality assurance as part of national tertiary education reforms. The proposed changes will see a greater focus on education outcomes and continuous quality improvement. Organisations will be expected to conduct an internal evaluation of their performance with periodic external validation to provide independent judgement of the organisation's performance and ability to provide a relevant teaching and learning experience. Wintec is in the process of developing an Excellence Framework based on the New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation (NZBEF) Criteria for Performance Excellence and was one of four ITPs to participate in a Self Assessment and External Evaluation and Review (SAEER) trial in 2008. A major focus of the new quality assurance system will be based on internal self assessment from an evaluative perspective with periodic external evaluations.

1. BACKGROUND

The move towards a revised quality assurance system began in 2006 when the New Zealand Government announced significant changes to the nature of quality assurance as part of the tertiary education reforms. Some of these changes are reflected in the Tertiary Education Strategy (2007-2012), which indicated that the reforms will include a stronger focus on quality, and that performance and outcomes will be major components of future investment decisions. A strong focus of any investment decision by the Government would therefore be based on the evidence of quality and the relevance of education and research.

The new direction of quality was further outlined in a Tertiary Education Reforms Cabinet paper (NZQA 2006). In this document, the government's expectations of the distinctive contributions of the various tertiary organisations were outlined. With regard to the Institutes of Technology and Polytechnic (ITP) sector, it was indicated that the tertiary education organisations (TEOs) should have a strong focus on vocational education of an internationally comparable quality. Similarly, TEOs are expected to have a strong international reputation.

The proposed changes will see a greater focus on education outcomes and continuous quality improvement, with investment decisions primarily based on quality and relevance. The two key components of the changes are a greater emphasis on organisational self assessment (SA) (a process to enable an organisation to conduct an internal evaluation of its overall performance); and external evaluation and review (EER) - a process where external evaluators from a quality assurance body will validate the self assessment approach by an organisation and provide assurance of confidence in the capability and performance of the organisation (ITPNZ, 2008).

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of a different approach to quality assurance as part of the new national quality assurance system.

2. A CHANGE IN FOCUS: SELF ASSESSMENT RATHER THAN AUDIT

The tertiary education reforms are intended to shift the focus away from maximum student numbers and participation to a clear focus on the quality and relevance of the overall teaching and learning experience. It is envisaged that the revised quality assurance system will increase the trust of the general public in the tertiary education industry and provide some evidence that tax money is well spent.

It was therefore decided that a major shift was needed away from audit (with a strong focus on inputs and processes), to an evaluative approach (with a strong focus on outcomes and relevance of teaching and learning). The new approach will require TEOs to undertake various ongoing whole-of-organisation self assessments, which will be followed by an EER every three to four years.

The previous audit system

Under the previous quality assurance system TEOs received quality assured status from Institute of Technology and Polytechnics Quality (ITP Quality) following an external audit. ITP Quality is the external quality assurance body for the ITP sector. External audits were conducted on a four year cycle, with mid-term quality reviews half way through each cycle. Under this arrangement, TEOs have some autonomy with regard to the approval of academic programmes, as well as acknowledged confidence from ITP Quality in the TEOs academic systems and processes of an ITP (ITPNZ 2006). The previous annual internal and four-yearly external audit processes were based on 12 ITPNZ academic quality standards and in some cases resulted in a “tick the box” compliance system with the major focus on the checking of organisational systems and processes. The main criticism of this audit system was the high priority that was placed on compliance and inputs rather than a focus on outcomes and continuous improvement. Some TEOs had already been exploring the self assessment and continuous improvement approach towards the end of the last audit cycle (late 2007 and 2008). This is therefore not a completely new concept, but rather a confirmation that a shift in focus from audit to self assessment could be more meaningful and add value to current good practices. For these TEOs this will mean building on and expanding existing good

systems, whilst for others a complete change of systems and organisational culture could be required.

The New Self Assessment and External Evaluation and Review (SAEER) System

Self assessment is seen as an ongoing process that allows a provider to examine the quality, value and importance of its educational delivery and outcomes, and to establish how it is meeting the needs of learners and other stakeholders. It is a mechanism through which TEOs can evaluate their own performance, identify strengths and opportunities for improvement, and make the necessary improvements over time (Sankar, 2009).

According to NZQA (2009), by self assessing their performance, TEOs ask the following:

- What (outcomes) are we (our TEO) trying to achieve?
- How do we know we have achieved these (or not)?
- What do we know about what contributes to (or inhibits) achievement of those outcomes?
- What are we doing, and what can we do, to improve?
- what improvement have we made (after time)?

In summary:

- What is? (What is happening?)
 - So what? (Why is it important, why does it matter?)
 - Now what? (What do we do now to improve things?)
- (NZQA, 2009)

Key Evaluation Questions (KEQ's)

Self assessment focuses on the answers to Key Evaluation Questions (Figure 1) – which were developed in consultation with all stakeholders. These questions act as a common framework for exploring the quality, value and importance of what is being achieved (NZQA, 2008).

According to NZQA (2009), the KEQ's are meant to address:

- Course/programme content and design (through KEQ 1)
- Delivery (through KEQ 2 and 3) and
- Outcomes (through KEQ 4, 5 and 6).

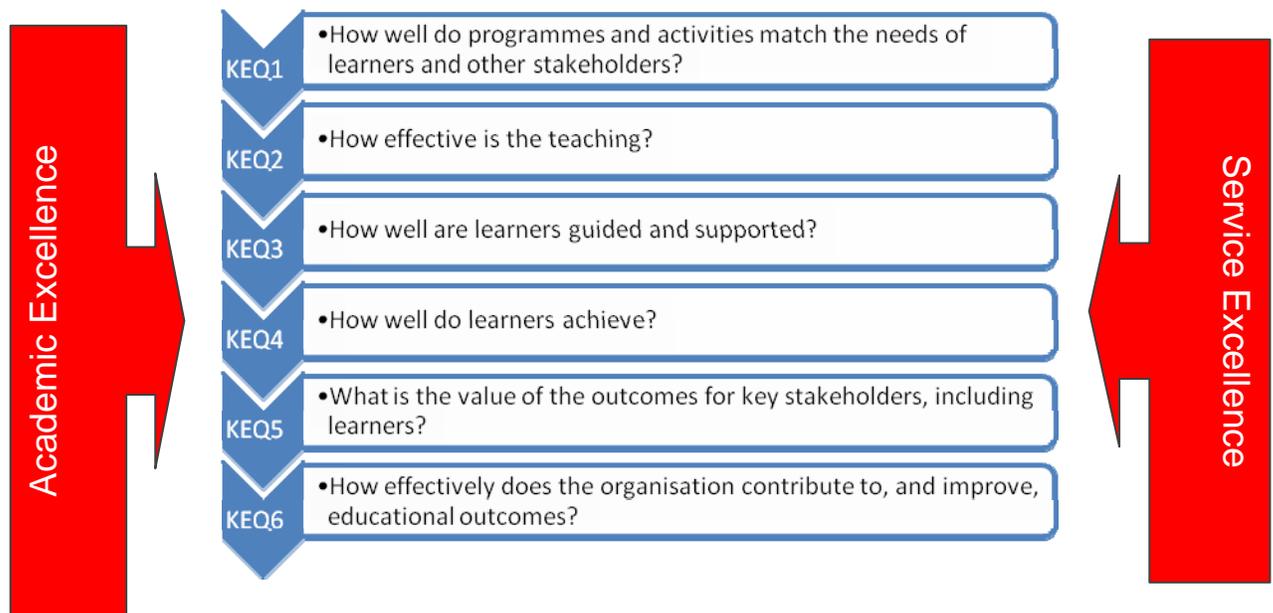


Figure 1: New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) Key Evaluation Questions (KEQ's)

Some of the main benefits of self assessment are that it:

- focuses on outcomes
- encourages a whole of organisation approach
- can be seen as “business as usual”, rather than a one-off project
- engage all stakeholders (internal and external)
- provides one with evidence of one’s own effectiveness – to inform future planning and decision making about improvements

The trial

In 2008, eight TEOs were selected to participate in the SAEER trial, co-ordinated by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). Our organisation was one of four ITPs selected. No specific rules were given as to how to conduct self assessment, as an effective model would be one designed by the organisation to meet its own needs and distinctive contribution (ITPNZ, 2008). One important aspect is that organisations could demonstrate that self assessment activities were taking place. Organisations participating in the trial were driven by different motives i.e. seeing it as an opportunity to shape and influence the future design of systems, investigating current self assessment processes or simply getting ahead of the pack. Approaches to the trial also varied greatly amongst participants, but regardless of the differences, all trial participants agreed that there was no turning back to the previous audit system. Self assessment was a valuable process and an opportunity to learn and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses in their organisations (Sankar, 2009).

According to NZQA (2009) the following insights and lessons about self assessment were learnt:

- it did generate new insights about performance and quality
- it increased focus on educational outcomes for learners;
- it built the capability of TEOs to use data to inform their work
- as the process is non-threatening, it evoked interest
- it resulted in mind-shifts within organisations
- it pushed organisations to ask different questions about their contribution which generated different answers
- it recognised the need to see the evidence
- it allowed TEOs to make judgements and be self-determining
- it increased awareness of other parts of the business and fostered a sense of interconnectedness and
- it had to be internalised – time and space needed to be available.

External Evaluation and Review (EER)

EER refers to the periodic process undertaken by the relevant quality assurance body that leads to judgements about the quality and value of an organisation's activities and processes as these relate to outcomes for learners and communities. The purpose of the EER is to evaluate the robustness of TEOs self assessment processes and establish the validity of the self assessment results. (Sankar, 2009). Following the self assessment trial, our organisation was visited by an EER panel.

The main focus of EER is to provide a judgement about an organisation's performance and capability in delivering high quality tertiary education (NZQA 2008). Capability refers to the extent to which an organization effectively self-manages its responsibilities for accountability and improvement. Performance is the extent to which valued outcomes are achieved

The conclusion of the EER process is a judgement by the EER panel on organisational capability and performance within the following parameters:

- High confidence (Highly effective self assessment processes);
- Confident (Generally good and consistent evidence of self assessment);
- Not yet confident (Self assessment is not effective).

Feedback from participants in the trial EER process was that the KEQ's were a meaningful way to structure EER discussions between external evaluators and TEOs. Although steps involved in the EER process were clear and well articulated, the sections dealing with judgements and conclusions raised more questions than answers when applied in the trial. According to Sankar (2009), key feedback from trial participants identified the need for external evaluators to differentiate this from the previous audit approach.

The above process is still in draft format, and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority is currently undertaking extensive consultation on the best approach towards the external evaluation and review process. Dr Michael Scriven, an ex-President of the American Evaluation Association, is of the opinion that evaluators need a range of evaluative skills to enable them to also look for side effects which may determine the ultimate evaluation result (Coffman 2003/4). Such an approach will assist external evaluators to come to an inclusive conclusion as opposed to a purely judgemental decision.

The fact that we have participated in the trial will assist our organisation to effectively incorporate the proposed new quality assurance system into our current quality management system. We are of the opinion that the KEQ's were limited in scope and that the focus during the trial emphasised the delivery of academic programmes too strongly. If the intention is to have a whole of organisation approach towards quality, then future evaluator panels will need to ensure a wider, all- inclusive scope. Such an approach will also be in line with our own views, where the intent was to have a quality assurance system which includes the strategic directions and goals of the organisation.

3. THE WINQUAL EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

As part of the greater emphasis on quality and outcomes nationally, a strategic organisational project was undertaken with a key focus on better positioning Wintec for the transition to the new national quality assurance framework and to increase awareness on quality across the organisation.

The main event of the quality initiatives was the launch of WinQual – a concept created as an overarching name to the things we do at Wintec that contribute to quality.

Approach

We have followed a two way approach to the new quality assurance system. The first part of the approach is around internal communications and organisational awareness through a number of different quality awareness sessions and the upskilling of our internal evaluators group. Secondly, we are in the process of embedding the Baldrige criteria into our existing quality management system which will be rebranded as an overarching WinQual Excellence Framework.

Quality awareness

During the past three years a number of events were organised to create better staff awareness of quality and the proposed new quality assurance system. Events focused on celebrating the good practices happening around the organisation and the value of continuous incremental improvement. We did this by getting staff enthused about quality, asking for innovative thinking, and creating unique events to get the message across and encourage staff to assess the way they are working and the resulting outcomes.

New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation (NZBEF)

We also became a member of the New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation (NZBEF). The Foundation is responsible for the recognition of organisational excellence through its various regional and national award programmes through their Criteria for Performance Excellence which is based on the Malcolm Baldrige National Award Quality programme. Wintec has no immediate interest in applying for these excellence awards, but with the support and mentoring of the Foundation have started to use the Baldrige criteria as a model for our internal self evaluation process and as an effective way to monitor the suggested improvements identified through this process. We acknowledge that there are other monitoring and improvement programmes, such as Lean, Six Sigma, Business Process Re-engineering and Balanced Scorecard; however, as a comprehensive programme it was felt that the Baldrige criteria would complement our existing quality systems, while some aspects of this criteria are also in line with the philosophy of the proposed new national quality assurance system.

Other benefits of using these criteria include:

- The criteria are internationally recognized;
- It provides an whole of organization approach;
- Employees are more engaged;
- The model is non- prescriptive – ask the right questions rather than prescribe;
- The strong emphasis on an evaluative approach.

The WinQual Excellence Framework is based on the New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation (NZBEF) Criteria for Performance Excellence (NZBEF 2009) – see Figure 1:

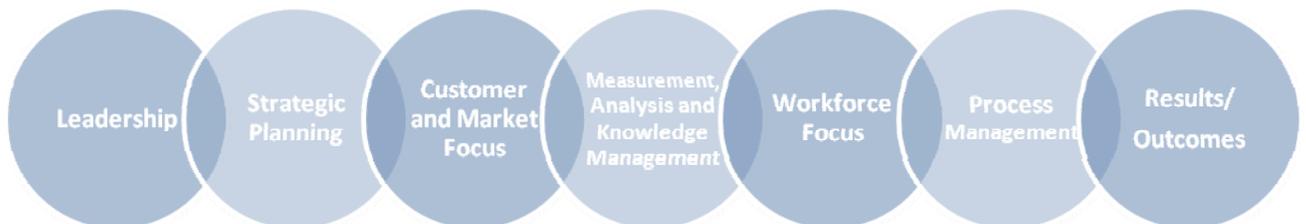


Figure 2: New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation (NZBEF) Criteria for Performance Excellence (based on the Baldrige Criteria)

Leadership – focuses on how the personal actions of the senior leaders guide and sustain an organisation. The organisations’ governance system, and fulfillment of legal, ethical and societal responsibilities are other elements of this category.

Strategic Planning – focuses on the development and deployment of strategic objectives and action plans.

Customer focus – the main focus is on engagement with key stakeholders (in the case of Wintec our students are one of our main stakeholders). Another important aspect in this category is how the voice of customers will be heard and how feedback will be used for improvement initiatives.

Measurement – focuses on selection, gathering, analysis, management and improvement of data and information.

Workforce – the focus is on engagement, management and development of the workforce and the utilization of workforce potential in alignment with the mission, strategy and any action plans.

Process management - designing of work systems and how key processes will contribute to value for stakeholders and achievement of success and sustainability within the organisation.

Results/Outcomes – focuses on overall performance and improvement of all key areas in the organisation.

The WinQual Excellence Framework will govern continuous improvement and quality throughout the organization through:

- Academic Excellence where the main focus is on academic delivery. The areas of interest are:
 - Teaching and learning
 - Flexible delivery
 - E-capability
- Service Excellence where the main focus is on service delivery. The areas of interest are (Parasuraman et.al., 1988):
 - Tangibles
 - Assurance
 - Reliability
 - Responsiveness
 - Empathy

4. CHANGES RESULTING FROM SELF ASSESSMENT AS ANOTHER APPROACH TO QUALITY ASSURANCE

Changes for TEOs

Changing the whole sector towards self assessment will certainly result in implementation issues that need to be explored one-by-one and organisation-by-organisation. It is hoped that support provided for participants during the trial will extend to other organisations still needing to make the transformation as well as be ongoing for trial participants. Being at a range of starting points, support will need to be tailored to various organisations. The new quality assurance system will undoubtedly challenge

organisations' comfort zones and require a mind-shift away from audit and an inputs focus.

Changes for staff

Feedback received from staff indicates that most were not really comfortable with the previous audit model, but accepted compliance as a non-negotiable. Recent feedback indicated that Self assessment and evaluation, with the strong focus on outcomes and relevance, is something most can relate to and can see the value of such a system. The quality assurance culture has generally shifted from an attitude of "must-do" to "want-to-do" and managers are more willing to participate in interactive sessions where their thinking is channelled into using data and results to effectively plan for the next year. Staff can now see the value of the various feedback mechanisms as the results are being used to identify trends and conduct planning for the next year. Self assessment has already resulted in a change in attitude for those involved in the trial and our organisation is planning to build on this behavioural change in 2009 and beyond.

Changes for students

Various forms of self assessment lead to better student centeredness at Wintec in the past few year. Various projects were born from a bigger focus on outcomes including:

- A major \$53 million campus rejuvenation with the main aim of modernising and centralising student services to ensure a positive experience and outcomes for students;
- An improved and prolonged orientation programme to address the fear of the unknown for new students and improve retention;
- Re-development of links with industry through new Employer Partnership Groups;
- Redevelopment of programmes with low completion rates, to provide early exit points, meaning students receive some sort of qualification after a period of study;
- Closer contact with student groups/forums to ensure feedback is received and acted upon immediately, resulting in improved communication;
- Better e-learning opportunities across a wider range of qualifications;
- Establishing of a Centre for Foundation Learning.

5. POSSIBLE FUTURE IMPACT ON EFFICIENCY, EFFECTIVENESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

The new approach to quality assurance is seen as a step in the right direction by participants in the trial.

To gain maximum efficiency, early buy-in from senior management is critical seeing that the self assessment process is quite resource intensive. It is important to keep the process simple and focus on what is really important. This should be done through a

well-designed internal communications strategy informing Academic Board, Council, Executive, senior management and all other staff. Building capability through internal evaluators is critical to the success of the self assessment as this group will act as ambassadors and help spreading the message.

When compared to audit, the evaluative conversations will lead to more thoughtful and deliberate discussions around outcomes and quality. The self assessment approach is widely perceived to be a more effective tool for engaging staff and focusing activities on outcomes. Engaging in reflective and inquiry-related activities create opportunity for learning and improvement within an organisation. TEOs need to be in an evaluative frame of mind in order to learn from the self assessment and undertaking these inquiry cycles fosters a culture of learning within the organisation.

It is hoped that the self assessment process will encourage better networking amongst TEOs and result in the sharing of good practice and organisational learning externally. Internally, self assessment will have a major impact on organisational culture and bring about revised user friendly quality management systems, suitable for whole-of-organisation self assessment, written in simple language, which all staff can relate to. The self assessment process is expected to deliver improved data management systems, enhanced alignment between organisational policy and/or practice and tailored programme design and delivery.

Tools and techniques provided and used by providers for self assessment are very useful, but guidelines provided to date for EER are not as helpful. Many TEOs are unsure how effective evaluative conversations would occur beyond self assessment as judgment and conclusions drawn by EER may have significant reputational and financial impact on organisations in future. To ensure a proper closing of the loop, more consultation with TEOs, and training of external evaluators is critical. It is expected that through the refinement of the EER process, providers will provide the final seal of approval on the self assessment, evaluation and external review process. This requires a high trust, high accountability relationship between NZQA and TEOs.

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