

ORGANISATIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENT

# IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

This case study is part of a series of case studies looking at self-assessment of organisational activities in practice. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and Ako Aotearoa identified a number of tertiary education organisations (TEOs) across the country that have participated in external evaluation and review, and conducted interviews with senior staff, and considered relevant internal documentation and external reports. Each case study focused on a different way self-assessment is being used. These case studies offer examples of effective practice in a variety of settings, and illustrate self-assessment that has been done well and has led to good outcomes.

CASE STUDY

## OTAGO POLYTECHNIC

### Self-assessment and **improving organisational capability**

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# OTAGO POLYTECHNIC

## Self-assessment and improving organisational capability

*The following case study represents the views of Otago Polytechnic, and reflects the understanding that NZQA and Ako Aotearoa drew from the interviews. NZQA and Ako Aotearoa thank Otago Polytechnic staff for agreeing to take part in this work, and their openness during the interviews.*

In considering the approach Otago Polytechnic takes to its self-assessment, NZQA and Ako Aotearoa identified the following key themes:

Establishing self-assessment requires role-modelling by senior leadership; embedding self-assessment involves engaging staff in various parts of the organisation to lead and take ownership of the process.

Information is essential: thinking about the types of data needed; how best to collect and analyse data; and, ensuring data and analysis are shared openly and in a way that encourages good performance are all critical for good self-assessment.

Flexibility and autonomy have been key guiding concepts, allowing different parts of the organisation to use the methods that are best for them to achieve a common end.

Self-assessment has not only ensured the quality of outcomes for students; it has made the organisation more efficient and a more enjoyable place to work in.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT PERFORMANCE IN THE TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR

External evaluation and review is a periodic evaluation of a TEO to provide a level of confidence (judgement) about the TEO's performance achieving outcomes relevant to identified stakeholders and its capability to use self-assessment to improve its performance. From September 2009 to September 2013, 18 ITPs participated in 19 external evaluation and reviews, including one ITP that has been through two.

External evaluation and review uses a systematic process to make independent judgements about educational performance and capability in self-assessment.

**EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE** is the extent to which the educational outcomes achieved by the ITP represent quality and value for learners and the wider community. An evaluation of educational performance involves answering questions focused primarily on the quality of learning and teaching, and the achievements of learners.

**CAPABILITY IN SELF-ASSESSMENT** is the extent to which the ITP systematically uses self-assessment information to understand performance and bring about improvement. It reflects the extent to which the ITP effectively manages its accountability and improvement responsibilities.

# “IF YOU WANT TO IMPROVE YOURSELF, [FIRST] KNOW YOURSELF”

Otago Polytechnic is an institute of technology/ polytechnic (ITP) based in Dunedin. Since its establishment in 1966, Otago Polytechnic has cultivated a strong reputation for delivering good educational outcomes for its community.

In 2011, Otago Polytechnic had 5,276 students (3,523 EFTS) enrolled in courses (including programmes) across a wide range of subjects – from level 1 through to Master’s degrees.

In its most recent external evaluation and review by NZQA (2011), Otago Polytechnic received statements of *Highly Confident* in self-assessment capability and *Highly Confident* in educational performance.

Otago Polytechnic’s self-assessment journey began in the early 2000s. During that time, the organisation was under significant financial pressure, and its long-term viability was being publicly questioned. This forced the organisation to think significantly about its performance, not simply in terms of perceived quality – many of Otago Polytechnic’s programmes had strong national reputations – but in terms of how well it was actually serving its learners and functioning as an organisation.

This journey started with improving Otago Polytechnic’s approach to data – the Chief Executive summed up the thinking behind this starting point as being, “If you want to improve yourself, [first] know yourself.” Like most tertiary education organisations, Otago Polytechnic was already collecting large amounts of data about its operation, from organisational data to student satisfaction, completion rates, and staff experiences. However, information management within the organisation was not effective. Data was not being collected consistently across the whole ITP and in some cases it remained only at the point of collection. Course feedback, for example, largely remained at the level of that course. While such information sometimes flowed up to school level, it rarely fed into higher level discussions.

Conversely, data collected centrally rarely flowed down to the level of individual practitioners.

Addressing these data issues initially involved developing more consistent and effective collection and sharing processes. Part of this task involved establishing a centralised ‘organisational research’ function, which took the lead on ensuring that the ITP was collecting the right information in a consistent and useful way.

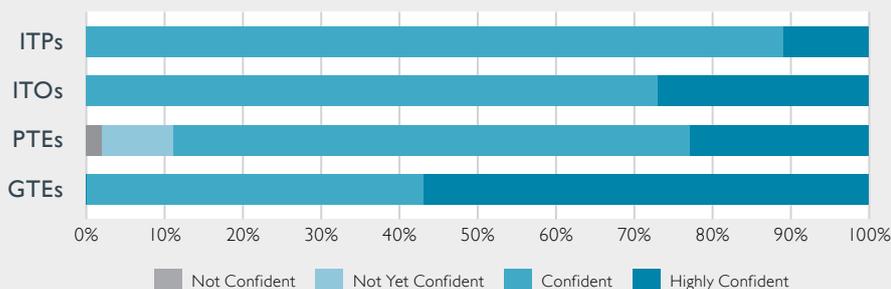
Otago Polytechnic also placed significant emphasis on improving the transparency of available data. All data used for self-assessment is now available on the organisation’s intranet and is accessible to all staff. Several interviewees noted that the instinctive reaction from many staff to negative data (e.g. low completions or negative student feedback) was to criticise the data itself. Having data openly available, however, allowed staff to have more open conversations about the data being used to support decisions, based on what the data meant rather than what the data was.

While improving data quality formed the foundation for Otago Polytechnic’s new approach, by itself, it did not represent a significant change to practice for the organisation.

The most common statement of confidence in self-assessment capability for ITPs is:

**CONFIDENT**

## STATEMENTS OF CONFIDENCE IN SELF-ASSESSMENT CAPABILITY ACROSS ALL TEOs†



† One wānanga has participated in external evaluation and review, resulting in *Confident* in self-assessment capability.

## ORGANISATIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENT Implementing effective practices

Other case studies include:  
Self assessment and...

**Creating fit-for-purpose learning**  
BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION ITO

**Developing sustainable programmes**  
PEOPLE POTENTIAL

**Enhancing learning and teaching**  
TŪRANGA ARARAU

**Pursuing effective change**  
EASTERN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY



SELF-ASSESSMENT  
IS NOT SOMETHING  
THAT **WE DO**,  
IT'S SOMETHING  
**WE ARE**"

# APPROACHING SELF-ASSESSMENT

## KEY POINTS

Culturally, Otago Polytechnic strongly emphasises the principles of self-management and self-accountability.

There is a strong emphasis on data sharing and quality to facilitate this process.

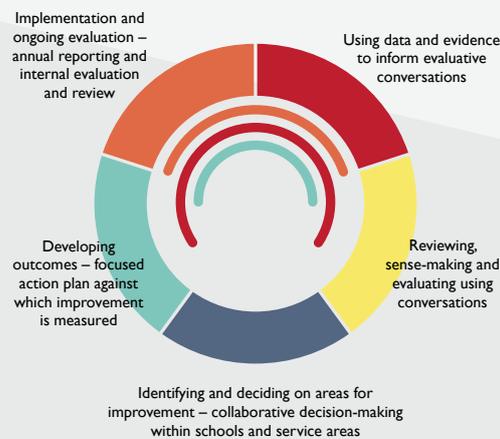
Structurally, the organisation focuses on annual school and area reviews, which are managed internally by each school/area.

The early years of the ITP's self-assessment journey saw a significant focus on gathering and presenting data, but less focus on considering how to use this data. Around 2007, systems were mature enough for the organisation to think consciously about usage, and this led to the development of Otago Polytechnic's current model of self-assessment, the operation of which is illustrated below.

The centrepiece of Otago Polytechnic's self-assessment approach – in place from 2008 – is the School and Programme and Service Area Review process. In this annual process, each unit reflects on what is working well in their area and what could be improved, using as a framework NZQA's six Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) and the ITP's internal sustainability, work environment, and Māori strategies. This process culminates in a presentation to the leadership team by the unit concerned, leading to a jointly developed plan that feeds into the unit's business planning. Initially, the entire school or area was invited to attend the leadership team session, but this is now at the discretion of the unit – some units send only senior managers and others the entire staff body.

a variety of processes, including hui, focus groups, and evaluative conversations. A key point for Otago Polytechnic is that each unit takes internal responsibility for the process; one interviewee described this as the senior leadership providing the core expectations about what a unit should be doing for self-assessment, and then giving them the autonomy to decide how they go about it. This process is intended to encourage all staff to actively engage with the KEQs in the context of their own practices and programmes, and thereby encourage evaluative thinking and evaluative practice. Evidence for each KEQ is developed at the school or area level and then fed up to the leadership team, rather than through a top-down approach.

Several interviewees referred to this as an ongoing 'whole-of-organisation' approach. In this view, self-assessment is not a separate process managed by a particular individual or office external to the units concerned, but is a process that should be led internally within all elements of the organisation. As the Chief Executive noted, the leadership team, "[does not] want to manage you; we want you to manage yourself." As part of this emphasis on self-management, the ITP disestablished the role of internal auditor; replacing it with the role of internal evaluator, whose task was to work with units to build their own capability. Later, even this internal evaluator role was removed, to emphasise that understanding quality is the role of all staff (although a director of quality role has been retained within the leadership team).



As well as standardised data used by all units (e.g. completion data, professional development, organisational survey and student feedback results), sourcing information for these reviews can involve

# BENEFITS OF USING SELF-ASSESSMENT

“

WE CAN  
TELL A STORY  
THAT SAYS  
'WE'RE PRETTY  
GOOD,'  
AND WHEN PEOPLE  
CHALLENGE IT,  
WE CAN SAY WHY”

## KEY POINTS

A stronger culture of self-management throughout the organisation, with all levels thinking more strategically.

Staff as a whole taking a more reflective approach to practice, building innovation, and seeing change in a more positive light.

A more positive work environment, with both lateral (within schools or areas) and vertical (up to management and governance) communication being significantly improved.

Improved overall performance – including on standardised metrics such as Educational Performance Indicators and better financial performance.

Otago Polytechnic believes that taking a self-assessment approach has led to fundamental improvements in its performance as a provider – that it can offer better and more relevant teaching than previously. This is reflected in its improved performance on standardised monitoring metrics such as the Tertiary Education Commission's Educational Performance Indicators (EPIs), and measures such as financial performance.

However, Otago Polytechnic treats these indicators as only one way of understanding provision. Where an audit approach would focus simply on improving these measures, the interviewees believed that adopting a self-assessment mindset has encouraged the organisation as a whole to think more widely about the nature of its provision and what 'learner-centredness' means. For example, the ITP uses multiple methods to understand the student experience, including external tools such as the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). Otago Polytechnic believes that it consequently has a deeper understanding of its educational quality than that represented by indicators such as EPIs.

Fully engaging with self-assessment is also perceived to have enhanced the ITP's management culture. As noted earlier, Otago Polytechnic's approach to self-assessment involves all parts of the ITP thinking about all aspects of the operation. For example, all levels are now thinking more strategically about the development of the organisation (one interviewee felt that even the Council was taking a far stronger interest in educational performance). This had led to more innovative practices within schools, and changing perceptions regarding low student results from, "we had bad students" to "what did we do to support – or not support – our students?" Critically, it was felt that the self-assessment approach encouraged schools and practitioners to reach this point on their own, creating greater staff engagement than if it had been implemented by top-down decree.

Engaging with self-assessment has also reduced staff stress levels. Interviewees felt that previous audit models, being built around defined episodic inspection, resulted in significant disruption around the audit period. Conversely, self-assessment's emphasis on ongoing engagement with quality (what one interviewee described as being "audit-ready every day") means that thinking about quality has become folded into business-as-usual practices. One senior manager within a school noted that where previous audit approaches had felt very punitive, self-assessment was more empowering for staff and a far more engaging – sometimes actually enjoyable – process.

For staff at Otago Polytechnic, these elements have led to a significantly improved working environment – represented clearly in improved results in the institution's working environment survey, but also through other feedback measures and external awards. In particular, several interviewees referred to improved communication throughout the organisation. The schools/areas themselves lead the review process, encouraging improved internal and horizontal communication. Beyond that, there was also a perceived increase in 'vertical' communication, with schools and programmes feeling that there is a much more active and positive engagement from senior management and institutional governance. This has benefits both ways: staff feel as though the leadership of the organisation genuinely listens to them, while management feels that it has a better understanding of the operation of the institution.

The strongest challenge faced by Otago Polytechnic has been developing and maintaining staff engagement & involvement. Given the emphasis that the ITP places on all staff taking responsibility for self-assessment, staff engagement & involvement is especially important. For this self-managed model to work, staff must be highly engaged in the process and open to engaging with all possible results – negative as well as positive.

“  
THE  
KEY BARRIER  
IS ALWAYS  
TRUST”

## CHALLENGES FACED

### KEY POINTS

The strongest challenge faced by Otago Polytechnic – both initially and on an ongoing basis – has been ensuring engagement & involvement from all staff. This is addressed through transparent and clear communications, and by the ‘self-management’ approach.

A further challenge is how to effectively close the feedback loop – at management level to schools, and at school level to students.

It is also important to ensure that the self-assessment review process does not become static, and is itself subject to reflection and evaluation.

Otago Polytechnic emphasises creating an environment of trust around quality. This started with consciously working to communicate the why of self-assessment to staff: explaining the context and rationale for new processes, how useful the leadership team thinks these processes will be for enhancing outcomes, and the higher-level goals to which the processes contribute. It also underpins the way in which organisational functions operate and management interacts with staff. For example, the staff member responsible for organisational research does not simply process or analyse data and report results back to schools or areas, but works actively to build a relationship with them and talk through the relevant data. This allows staff to raise concerns about data and discuss what it means in the context of their unit, and this in turn increases awareness within the leadership team of any issues around unit-level data collection and reporting. As a result, units that were initially wary of greater centralisation of data collection have become far less resistant.

For Otago Polytechnic, the ‘self-management’ philosophy that underpins its approach to self-assessment is also seen as inherently a way of addressing this issue of staff buy-in. Devolving self-assessment responsibility to the unit level is believed to provide a more empowering and less threatening environment that encourages engagement on the part of staff. As part of this, the ITP has invested in training for heads of schools and service areas in how to conduct evaluative conversations. This was intended to ensure that both an understanding of self-assessment and possession of the necessary skills to effectively lead it were not concentrated in one part of the organisation, but distributed throughout and to the people responsible for the day-to-day management and activities of the organisation.

The second key challenge has been ‘closing the feedback loop’: ensuring that feedback is received, analysed, and acted on, and the consequences

reported back to those who have given it.

This final part is crucial, as it shows the people participating in feedback processes that their input is having a genuine impact on the operation of the organisation – or provides an opportunity to explain clearly why the feedback has not been acted on. Staff feel that their input is genuinely being listened to and their comments taken seriously. This feedback loop also exists at the student level; the ITP has put a lot of effort into ensuring not only that learner feedback is collected and acted on, but that staff keep students informed of the changes that have happened as a result.

This process also encompasses the need to ensure information is shared across the organisation, and Otago Polytechnic has established initiatives to encourage this. For example, in open ‘‘Stories of Success’’ sessions, units speak about successful innovations or strategies for learner success, and these are also videoed and placed on the ITP’s intranet. This encourages peer-to-peer staff learning and also celebrates such success, rewarding schools and areas for actively engaging with their own performance.

The third key challenge relates to the ongoing operation of the self-assessment process, and the need to avoid it becoming a ‘tick-box’ or pseudo-audit approach. Some interviewees expressed concern that the KEQs could become a simple checklist – for example, a school with consistently high completion rates may begin to treat KEQ 1 (‘How well do learners achieve?’) as largely a formality. Schools and service areas are therefore being encouraged to move beyond using the KEQs alone to frame their self-assessment processes, and to think more widely about what quality performance means for them. The further development of internal capability is one way of addressing this, and thought is being given to developing a pool of expert evaluators internal to the ITP.

# OPPORTUNITIES AND FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

“...IT MUST BE  
GROWN  
FROM  
WITHIN”

## KEY POINTS

Having a dedicated organisational research function has encouraged positive engagement with the evidence and information that underpins self-assessment.

Role-modelling and leadership by the leadership team has been critical.

Thinking clearly about language and communication can support self-assessment not being seen as an external ‘judgement’, but as a way of supporting staff to do the best for learners.

Using external benchmarks, models and lessons, but ensuring that they are adapted to fit the Otago Polytechnic context.

A key part of the reason for Otago Polytechnic’s success with self-assessment has been the financial situation it faced in the early 2000s. This provided a strong motivator for the organisation to start thinking about how to improve performance, and meant that when NZQA began introducing the idea of the self-assessment approach to quality, the ITP started somewhat ahead of the game. Another key success factor was implementing the previously mentioned organisational research role, which has allowed Otago Polytechnic to better understand and use data to support good practice.

However, the most important success factor – identified in every interview for this case study – was the role of the ITP’s leadership. This was expressed in a variety of ways, including references to the qualities of specific individuals, but the core message was that the leadership team had been crucial for reducing defensiveness and encouraging staff to engage with self-assessment. Part of this involved the leadership team committing to providing practical support to staff. For example, the Chief Executive and Director of Quality meet with the convenor of each course that shows a below-benchmark completion rate, to support them in identifying specific improvement to their course.

Also key to this has been a commitment to clearly role-modelling good practice to other parts of the organisation. The leadership team is treated as its own service area for the purposes of self-assessment and goes through the same process as other units (with the ITP Council taking the place of the leadership team). This demonstrates the importance the team places on the process, and

emphasises that the process is about supporting and enhancing quality of practice – it is not a compliance tool by which management can ‘control’ other parts of the organisation.

Overall, Otago Polytechnic’s approach to self-assessment embodies the notion of contextualised practice and internal drive. Rather than taking ‘off-the-shelf’ approaches or deploying a single consultant, interviewees emphasised that processes need to be developed that suit the specific environment and culture of an organisation. Similarly, good quality self-assessment cannot be imposed externally – whether ‘externally’ in this context refers to central government expectations of a TEO, or senior management’s expectations of a school or service area. Instead, self-assessment must involve all elements within an organisation engaging with the concept in their own context, evaluating their own performance, and taking responsibility both for what is working and for addressing what is not working. As one interviewee put it, genuine self-assessment “must be grown from within.”

“...GOOD QUALITY SELF-ASSESSMENT  
CANNOT BE IMPOSED EXTERNALLY”



# Self-assessment

Self-assessment is a key component of NZQA's evaluative quality assurance framework. Evaluative self-assessment requires a TEO to evaluate itself, by focusing on how well it is identifying, responding to and meeting learner and stakeholder needs, and taking appropriate action in light of the understanding gained.



Self-assessment across an organisation focuses on: the outcomes sought, and evidence of learner and organisational achievement of these outcomes; the key processes influencing achievement of these outcomes, including processes for continuous improvement of quality and identifying stakeholder needs, and compliance with legislative and regulatory requirements.

*The specific processes for self-assessment are not prescribed. To ensure that the framework works in a consistent and comparable way, however, TEOs are required to apply the following high-level requirements for self-assessment:*

- Implement self-assessment using the key features of effective self-assessment.
- Answer the key evaluation questions to provide a common basis for both the self-assessment and external evaluation and review processes.
- Use relevant minimum quantitative and qualitative data on such matters as learner enrolments, retentions and completions.

## KEY FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE SELF-ASSESSMENT

Self-assessment includes the ongoing processes a TEO uses to gain evidence of its own effectiveness in providing quality education. Processes used for self-assessment should be comprehensive, authentic, transparent, robust, and focused on the following areas:

### NEEDS ASSESSMENT

*To what extent is the TEO systematically determining and addressing the needs of relevant learners, employers and the wider community?\**



### PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

*To what extent are processes and practices supporting successful learning and helping achieve outcomes?*



### LEARNER ACHIEVEMENT

*To what extent is educational provision having an impact on learner progress and the achievement of intended learning outcomes?*



### OUTCOMES

*What outcomes are learners achieving, including educational achievement and longer term economic, social, and cultural benefits? What is the value of those achievements for the relevant learners, employers and the wider community?\**



### USING WHAT IS LEARNED

*To what extent have evidence-based conclusions and decision-making been incorporated into strategic and business planning to drive improvements?*



### ACTUAL IMPROVEMENTS

*What has improved? To what extent have those improvements been relevant and worthwhile? How do you know that the changes you made have had the effect you intended? Has the change had an impact on the problem identified?*



\*Including, where EER involves mātauranga Māori evaluative quality assurance (MMEQA) criteria, whānau, hapū, iwi, hāpori Māori and mātauranga Māori as a body of knowledge.

## KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The key evaluation questions explore important dimensions of educational quality: outcomes, programme content and design, and delivery. These questions provide a common basis on which TEOs are reviewed by NZQA. The six, high-level, open-ended questions focus either on the outcomes achieved or the key processes that contribute to those outcomes.

How well do learners achieve?

What is the value of the outcomes for key stakeholders, including learners?

How well do programmes and activities match the needs of learners and other stakeholders?

How effective is the teaching?

How well are learners guided and supported?

How effective are governance and management in supporting educational achievement?