



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

EASTERN INSTITUTE
OF TECHNOLOGY

Self-assessment and
pursuing effective change

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EASTERN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Self-assessment and pursuing effective change

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

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

A significant change process, such as the EIT-Tairāwhiti merger, is an opportunity to develop self-assessment practice. Managing major changes effectively requires the same fundamental approach as self-assessment: being clear about what you are trying to achieve, planning for how those goals can be achieved, and then monitoring how well you are doing in achieving them.

Self-assessment provides a framework that can help staff engage with concepts like continuous improvement. It is also important to remember that different disciplines and parts of an organisation will have different capabilities when it comes to engaging with self-assessment, and appropriate support needs to be provided to those areas that experience difficulty engaging.

Positive leadership from senior management along with dedicated support structures are key in helping the organisation as a whole understand the core ideas behind self-assessment.

Self-assessment and reflective approaches have encouraged staff to engage more openly with issues around quality and performance, and assisted EIT in its goal of preserving the strengths of both EIT and Tairāwhiti during the merger.

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.

EIT is an institute of technology/polytechnic (ITP) based in Hawke's Bay and the East Coast of the North Island. Originally established in 1975 in Napier, in January 2011, it merged with Tairāwhiti Polytechnic, based in Gisborne.

In 2012, a total of 7,782 students (4,285 EFTS) were enrolled in EIT courses across a wide range of subjects – from level 1 through to Master's degrees.

At its most recent external evaluation and review (undertaken by ITP Quality in 2010, prior to the merger with Tairāwhiti), EIT received statements of *Confident* in self-assessment capability and *Highly Confident* in educational performance. At the time of the merger, Tairāwhiti had yet to participate in an external evaluation and review.

The current activities of EIT, including self-assessment, have inevitably been shaped by its merger with Tairāwhiti Polytechnic. In 2010, Tairāwhiti made the strategic decision to seek a merger with another tertiary education provider rather than continue as a separate organisation. After considering several options, the polytechnic selected EIT's proposal – based to a large extent on EIT's stated desire to consult and work with Tairāwhiti in a partnership of equals. A merger case was developed and presented to the Government for approval.

The case was accepted, on the proviso that the merger would take effect within a month. This created significant challenges, as the intended planning phase became the implementation phase. However, the merger occurred successfully at the beginning of 2011 with little apparent disruption to staff or students.

Many of the interviewees for this case study noted that – while stressful – the short timeframe may have been a blessing in disguise. The timeline required an immediate focus on what was needed to function as a single entity, and to be open and ready to offer programmes in the new academic year. It is telling that, when the interviewees reflected on what could have been done differently, the responses were specific to certain events and satisfaction with the overall merger appeared to be high.

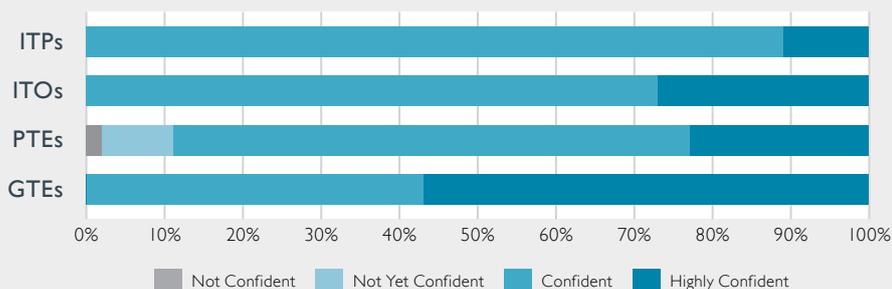
The merger has resulted in significant change for EIT. In part, this is due to partnership being a key concept underpinning the merger. Although the name Tairāwhiti would disappear, the process needed to respect the history and culture of both ITPs and staff, and ensure that the best elements of each organisation were preserved.

As such, the merger has resulted in EIT reconsidering many of its processes and approaches, and developing new ones. Self-assessment has been part of this in two ways. Firstly, the new structure has determined how the organisation approaches self-assessment. Secondly, the new structure provides a frame for managing the transition to the new environment in a sustainable way that keeps the merged ITP focused on how to best meet the needs of learners.

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...

Improving organisational capability
OTAGO POLYTECHNIC

Creating fit-for-purpose learning
BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION ITO

Developing sustainable programmes
PEOPLE POTENTIAL

Enhancing learning and teaching
TŪRANGA ARARAU

APPROACHING SELF-ASSESSMENT

“SELF-ASSESSMENT WAS A
BIG COMPONENT
OF THE MERGER,
EVEN IF IT WASN'T CALLED THAT ...
REFLECTION WAS
A KEY WAY
[OF MAKING IT WORK]”

KEY POINTS

For EIT, self-assessment is a language and toolset that helps staff think about continuous improvement of practice.

To avoid a checklist approach that does not encourage thinking critically about practice, tools such as the key evaluation questions are not used to structure self-assessment processes but instead to reflect on such things as staff meetings.

EIT focuses on ensuring consistency rather than *uniformity*.

For EIT, the language of self-assessment is largely synonymous with taking a continuous improvement approach to organisational performance. Although this has been a longstanding goal of EIT, self-assessment has – through tools such as the Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) – provided a framework and language that helps individual staff and the organisation as a whole to make practical improvements.

A key desire of EIT was to try to balance a consistent, systematic and robust approach to self-assessment with the need to encourage flexible and adaptable practices that suit the needs of specific programmes and groups of learners. At the programme level this has included using the KEQs to frame how faculties, programmes and service areas think about the quality of their teaching approaches and how well they are meeting their goals. Programme-level meetings are coded against KEQs, as are the annual reports prepared for faculty management.

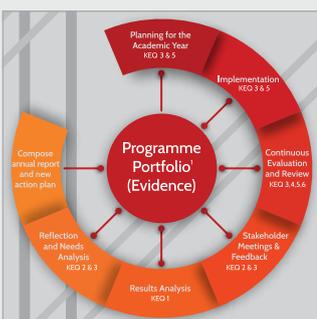
The emphasis placed on the KEQs could lead to a checklist approach that accentuates the questions over actually engaging with broader self-assessment concepts and their relationship to the quality of provision. However, EIT aims to treat the KEQs as a framing tool. For example, at the programme-level meetings referred to above, staff do not proceed consecutively through answering each KEQ. Instead, meeting notes are taken throughout the discussion and the topics, issues and responses are afterwards aligned to each KEQ. In this way, the questions become integrated into business as usual to help staff consider the context and meaning of their discussions about learner outcomes and programme effectiveness – both in day-to-day practice and during annual review.

Beyond this, there was a sense at EIT that self-assessment has also been part of managing the merger process. Several interviewees noted that, while the specific term 'self-assessment' was not used with regard to the merger, the same underlying concepts drove the approach to joining the two organisations. These concepts included the achievement and experiences of learners as

the organisation's central concern, the need to fully understand the strengths and weaknesses of both ITPs, and using continual assessment and reflection to gauge how the merger was – and still is – tracking.

This focus on identifying intended outcomes and the best way of achieving those outcomes was expressed as part of a common theme by most interviewees: wanting to ensure *consistency* rather than *uniformity* within the ITP. As one interviewee characterised it, "it'd be a huge mistake to try and get everyone doing the same, so what are the key things that we need consistency about?" Although expressed in terms of working with multiple campuses, this comment represents a larger way of thinking about the work of the organisation – that it should be based on ensuring activities are fit for purpose and reflect the outcomes that EIT is trying to achieve.

Another recurrent theme from interviews at EIT was the view that self-assessment was not necessarily about doing new things, but about trying to use current processes more effectively. This was expressed as both a success factor and as a principle that informs how the ITP approaches self-assessment. For example, the organisation has produced a series of postcards that highlight each KEQ and at what point during the academic year it might be worthwhile to think about the particular evidence associated with the KEQ. EIT sees this as a way to anchor self-assessment to the existing cycle of a programme. Initiatives like this can integrate key self-assessment concepts into reflective practice, rather than creating an add-on that exacerbates a feeling among staff that self-assessment is something additional to usual practice.



Detail of EIT KEQ postcard.

BENEFITS OF SELF-ASSESSMENT

“ [WE'RE] NOT TRYING TO MAKE ONE CULTURE. [WE] APPRECIATE THE DIFFERENCES WHILE STILL WORKING AS ONE ORGANISATION”

KEY POINTS

A strong emphasis on identifying and retaining the strengths of both organisations meant that effective practice was shared and maintained during the merger.

Staff seem to be more engaged in conversations about quality, and more open in discussions about performance.

EIT considers that it is better able to identify and address issues earlier and more effectively.

As noted earlier, EIT's merger experience was seen by many interviewees as an example of continuous improvement and self-assessment in practice. In this context, the perceived success of the merger – particularly given the short timeframe – was seen as an example of the benefits that taking a self-assessment approach can bring. Interviewees indicated that this strongly reflective approach had assisted with some of the specific challenges of the merger; one interviewee noted that staff in remote areas felt that their views and feedback were more effectively received and taken note of at higher levels of the ITP than may have occurred without this approach.

Similarly, there was a common belief that this approach had genuinely led to the strengths of Tairāwhiti being recognised and supported at the merged EIT. The most commonly cited example of this was the strategy that had been developed for reaching out into the rural communities surrounding the ITP. Many interviewees mentioned that EIT had traditionally adopted an approach in which rural students were expected to travel to the main campus or to suburban based learning centres for classes. Tairāwhiti's approach, however, was based on a network of rural programme delivery, utilising community facilities such as marae. Analysis and reflection that took place during the merger suggested that Tairāwhiti's approach was more effective for learners in these communities, and this strength was recognised and preserved within the new model.

Most interviewees noted how self-assessment encouraged reflective and systematic thinking about quality, performance and day-to-day outcomes. Part of this was a perception that staff were being engaged in more genuine conversations on quality than the previous audit-based regimes had allowed for. Several interviewees referred to previous annual reporting from programmes as being somewhat tokenistic or “highlight reels” designed to emphasise positive achievements. This was contrasted with

what the interviewee considered to be the more genuine and honest reports that were being generated by programmes now that EIT has started using self-assessment principles to frame discussions.

Other interviewees noted that they felt EIT is more effectively noticing problems as they arise and becoming better at resolving them. For example, in discussing a specific programme, one interviewee expressed a belief that EIT was now better positioned to identify and address differences in achievement between the Gisborne and Taradale campuses soon after they become apparent. Under previous approaches, identifying these sorts of issues could take some time, and even if they were noticed relatively quickly, they could only be dealt with at designated times. In either case, issues could worsen or become more strongly embedded before attempts were made to deal with them. In contrast, self-assessment emphasises day-to-day reflection and intervention, allowing solutions to be implemented sooner and thus more effectively.

Another interviewee noted that the combination of the merger and introduction of the self-assessment approach had encouraged academic managers to move towards a focus on how well activities and programmes are performing for learners and key stakeholders. This approach aligned with other interviewees referring to self-assessment, and the reflection it stimulates, as leading to greater clarity about the reasons for particular activities.

In turn, these organisational and professional benefits appear to be having some impact on the learners at EIT, with increased completion rates in recent years. Although interviewees were cautious about claiming a direct relationship between these increases and the implementation of self-assessment, they commented that this approach to quality has taken staff to the point where they engage with such data and use it to improve student outcomes. Interviewees also noted a stronger level of engagement with stakeholders.



BARRIERS
ARE MAINLY AROUND
RELATIONSHIPS ...
IT'S MORE THAN JUST
MAKING A VISIT –
**UNDERSTANDING
IS CRITICAL**

CHALLENGES FACED

KEY POINTS

The merger process could have harmed the relationships on which self-assessment relies, and this had to be explicitly addressed.

Self-assessment concepts come more easily to some parts of the institution than others.

Obtaining relevant information can be challenging, as can ensuring that staff understand how to effectively use information as part of a reflective practice.

For many at EIT, relationships were seen as key to the success of self-assessment. Where people talk to each other, feel able to share information freely, and are open and honest, self-assessment can be very successful. On the other hand, where relationships are not strong, it can be difficult to persuade people to engage with self-assessment.

Several interviewees noted that understanding the impact of good relationships on successful self-assessment was an important lesson for EIT in the context of the merger: It would have been easy for resentment and rivalry to develop between campuses, and for this to affect students. To avoid this, EIT now makes a conscious effort to keep those relationships strong. Staff travel between campuses, technology is used to run some classes simultaneously in both the Gisborne and Taradale campuses, and a conscious effort is being made to treat the organisation as truly multi-campus rather than a core and a satellite.

Cultural differences between occupations and professions also need to be taken into account when implementing self-assessment. For some staff, using the way they work as a means for identifying with self-assessment helped because they already interacted with concepts of self-reflection, such as through programme review. In social work, for example, reflective practice is a core part of professional competence. For others, however, more effort needs to be made to make these ideas relevant.

One strategy adopted with a school at EIT was for a relevant senior manager to sit down with staff to discuss the KEQs and how they related to the activities of the tutors: what they did, how they taught, and how they interacted with relevant employers and communities. This provided a way of connecting the more abstract language and ideas behind self-assessment to the actual work of practitioners on the ground – making it seem real to them.

Obtaining and using appropriate data was also noted as a challenge, given that good quality information is critical to self-assessment. Some interviewees noted that basic administrative data – achievement and participation rates and the like – can be relatively easy to find but often does not provide the full picture of the impact and quality of a programme. Finding ways to understand the broader human story of programmes can be difficult, but is critical for understanding how well a programme is actually meeting the needs of learners.

Being able to access information is not the same as being able to use it effectively. That requires understanding what a given piece of data actually means in the context of a given programme, and being able to use all the available information in a way that enhances outcomes for learners.

This means that implementing self-assessment effectively can be resource-intensive. Self-assessment practice should require less dedicated staff time and money as it becomes more embedded in day-do-day practice (as in the example of using KEQs to reflect on discussions in meetings). However, the ITP will likely need to continue to commit to investing in staff, systems, and processes that help make that transition easier. For example, although creating a specialist senior staff role devoted to EIT's engagement with self-assessment might have been a significant up-front cost, there was strong agreement from interviewees that the task would have been more difficult without that dedicated support person.

OPPORTUNITIES AND FACTORS FOR SUCCESS



[YOU] NEED TO
GET OUT OF
THE AUDIT MODEL
– ‘YES, WE HAVE A POLICY OVER HERE’ –
AND INTO THE MINDSET OF
‘WHAT EVIDENCE DO WE HAVE,
AND WHAT ARE WE DOING
ABOUT IT?’”

KEY POINTS

The EIT-Tairāwhiti merger, as a significant change for the institution, provided a basis for the ITP to introduce self-assessment concepts.

Having organisational leadership and dedicated resources has been critical in helping staff start to see self-assessment as an integral part of practice.

Making an effort to discuss self-assessment in clear, relevant ways can create an environment where staff are engaging with potentially difficult concepts.

In addition to maintaining good relationships, which is a critical challenge for self-assessment, one of the main success factors identified by interviewees was “socialising” self-assessment. Interviews also noted that the organisation is finding ways to create self-assessment practice that is meaningful to the way people think and work. As noted earlier, this included having people dedicated to implementing self-assessment. All interviewees mentioned how valuable it had been to have a staff member whose role was specifically to help others come to grips with this approach. They also noted that it was important to be clear about why this approach was being implemented and the value it held for students, staff, and the communities they serve.

In this regard, it appears that the merger between EIT and Tairāwhiti – although challenging – was helpful in moving the organisation towards an evaluative or self-assessment model. EIT wanted this process to preserve the strengths of both organisations and address their weaknesses. Therefore, the merger had to involve understanding of what each organisation was trying to achieve, how well it was achieving these goals, and how to replicate what was working well in the newly merged organisation.

Similarly, seeing the merger as a process directed focus to how the organisation is operating and how it may need to alter systems and develop new ones. The two ITPs formally became one on January 1, 2012, but EIT still sees itself in a process of transition that has led, and will lead, to more changes over time. All this provides an organisational environment that encourages staff – academic, management and administrative – to develop more reflective ways of thinking about their practice.

One aspect of socialising self-assessment is ensuring that the environment supports people to focus on quality and feel comfortable acknowledging when something is not working well. Given the high stakes,

some interviewees saw this as an area where senior management could display leadership by ensuring that staff focus on the underlying goal of enhancing quality rather than meeting targets. One manager gave the example of the Tertiary Education Commission’s Education Performance Indicators, noting that while these are very important for the organisation, her philosophy when talking to staff was, “it’s my role to worry about that side; you think about how to improve your courses”.

The final key message from EIT for making self-assessment work was simplicity and clarity. Several interviewees made the point that self-assessment can seem vague or complex – even in areas where (as noted earlier) the underlying concepts might not be new or particularly different. It can therefore be helpful for staff to have access to simple guidance to provide greater detail when necessary. Similarly, simple devices like the previously mentioned postcards can help staff relate these concepts back to their everyday work.

The organisation continues to concentrate on the essence of self-assessment. In the words of the chief executive, “keep it simple and effective; [concentrate on] *how do you tell the story?*”



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?