



## **Institutional Quality Assurance – does a perfect framework exist?**

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**ABSTRACT**

*New Zealand education organisations have undergone major changes to its quality assurance system over the last number of years. In 2009, a new national system was introduced by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). Internal academic audits were replaced by self assessments while external academic audits are conducted as external evaluation and reviews. One of the major changes includes a greater focus on education outcomes and continuous quality improvement, and a move away from a compliance based system. Education organisations are encouraged to perform ongoing internal self assessment while periodic external evaluation and reviews will provide an independent judgement of their overall education performance and ability to provide a relevant teaching and learning student experience. In response to the new approach to quality assurance in New Zealand, Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec) has redeveloped its Quality Management System (QMS). A number of other frameworks were investigated and an Excellence Framework, based on the Education Criteria for Performance Excellence, was introduced at this education organisation. The Education Criteria for Performance Excellence is based on the internationally recognised Malcolm Baldrige criteria. With a strong focus on self assessment and continuous improvement this criteria was ideally suited to form the basis of the Framework. In this paper the author explains the rationale and influences behind the redevelopment of the organisational QMS and the main outcomes of this project.*

**Key words:** *Academic Excellence, Criteria for Performance Excellence, Excellence Framework, External Review, Self Assessment, Service Excellence.*

## 1. Introduction

A major change towards the New Zealand quality assurance system was announced in 2006 by the New Zealand Government as part of its tertiary education reforms. Following months of consultation and numerous discussions between key stakeholders, a new national quality assurance system was introduced in 2009. The key characteristics of this new system were the introduction of:

- Organisational self assessment - an ongoing internal process used by an education organisation as part of its improvement philosophy
- External evaluation and review - a periodic evaluation used by external quality assurance bodies to provide a confidence statement about its educational performance and capability in internal self assessment
- Key evaluation questions which became an integral part of the evaluative approach towards quality assurance. These overarching questions are:
  - How well do learners achieve?
  - What is the value of the outcomes for the 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?

These questions were seen as integral to the dimensions of educational quality, including academic programme content and design, course delivery and outcomes.

This paper aims to provide an overview of the development and introduction of a new quality assurance system to redevelop an education organisation's quality system from a compliance-only approach to one of continuous self assessment with a strong focus on continuous improvement and educational outcomes.

## **2. So what is different?**

One of the major changes of the new evaluative approach towards quality assurance was the shift away from audit and focus on compliance to an evaluative approach where there would be a strong focus on outcomes and the relevance of teaching and learning at an education organisation. Organisations are encouraged to undertake ongoing self assessment. An External Evaluation and Review visit will now be taking place every four years. One of the criticisms of the previous academic audit system was the high priority that was

placed on compliance and inputs rather than a focus on outcomes and continuous improvement.

Self assessment is defined as the ongoing processes used by an organisation to gain evidence of its own effectiveness to provide quality education. The responsibility for this process is organisation-wide, and involves governors, managers, teachers and support staff. It is an integrated process, which should lead to an informed understanding of what is being achieved by the organisation. This in turn would then influence organisational decision making, prioritising, planning and actions (NZQA, 2009).

External evaluation and review is defined as “a periodic (normally every 3-4 years) evaluation of an education organisation to provide a confidence statement about the organisation’s educational performance and its capability in self-assessment”. According to NZQA external evaluation will focus on areas such as the “extent to which a training organisation systematically determines and addresses needs of learners and wider community, the key processes that contribute to the achievement of outcomes for learners and the quality of educational provision and its impact on learner progress and achievement”. One of the main attributes of an evaluative approach is to provide a “systematic process for answering questions which are focussed explicitly on quality, value

and the importance of tertiary education outcomes and key contributing processes” (NZQA, 2009).

The new system also required a mindshift from staff and the previous auditor panels. In addition to a new approach to quality assurance, new terminology were introduced and different skills were required from evaluators. Dr Michael Scriven, an expert in evaluation theory, is of the view 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). This approach would enable external evaluators to come to an inclusive conclusion as opposed to a purely judgemental decision.

Another major change of the new system is in the reporting of the results of the external review. In the previous audit system organisations received compliance ratings or non-compliance ratings where they did not meet the specific academic standard. Under the new system, the results are expressed as confidence statements. So for both educational performance and capability in self assessment, statements are indicated as: Highly Confident, Confident, Not Yet Confident or Not Confident.

### **3. A new Quality Management System – the WinQual Excellence Framework**

#### **3.1. A change project**

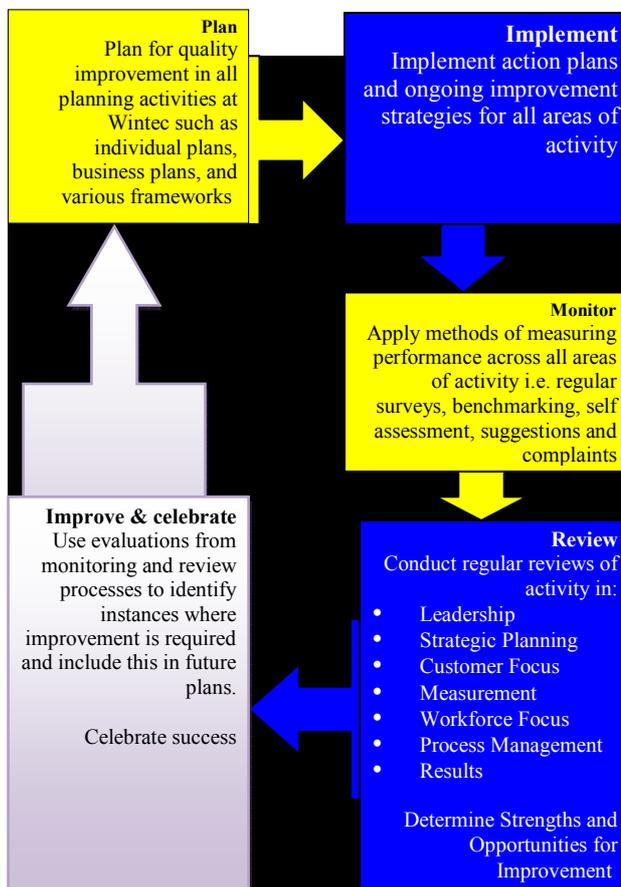
It was against this background that Wintec investigated a number of other quality systems. There were a few important factors that influenced the organisation's decision in moving to the new quality framework, such as the focus of the new national system on organisational self assessment, the organisation's drive to become a globally recognised educational provider and the commitment to produce work-ready graduates that are sought after both nationally and internationally.

The previous national academic audit system was based on 12 national academic standards, and these standards were used as a framework for the organisation's internal and external academic audits. Internal audits were conducted annually by Wintec staff for Wintec academic schools and some support service areas, while the external quality assurance body was responsible to conduct an audit every four years.

A small project group was assigned to revise the organisation's existing Quality Management System. One of the earlier projects of the group included a quality awareness campaign in 2007 at the organisation where the WinQual concept was launched. One of the ideas behind this concept was the promotion

to staff that quality is not a one-off process, but is integrated into every aspect of the organisation. Staff were also encouraged to be familiar with the

impact of ongoing self assessment on their area of responsibility and how self assessment contributes to quality and continuous improvement at the organisation. Figure 1 below shows the continuous quality improvement cycle promoted through WinQual.



**Figure 1: Continuous quality improvement cycle(Adapted from WinQual: Academic Quality and Beyond, 2007).**

### 3.2 Why the Education Criteria for Performance Excellence?

The organisation became a member of the New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation (NZBEF) as well as the New Zealand Organisation for Quality (NZOQ). Some of the benefits of membership of these external groups were the availability of organisational assessment tools, training programmes to upskill staff and various network opportunities such as “Knowledge Hours” and Quality celebrations events.

Members of the project group underwent national evaluator training through the Foundation, and were also instrumental in an early trial of the new national system at the organisation in 2008. The trial was conducted under the auspices of NZQA, and the lessons and results of this exercise were used to further improve the national system.

The New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation coordinates an annual awards programme based on the Criteria for Performance Excellence, which is aligned to the Malcolm Baldrige criteria. The new national quality system has a strong emphasis on self assessment and an evaluative approach; the group therefore decided to use best practice examples from the Foundation in designing a unique internal self assessment model. As in the case of the national system, the concept of self assessment as a tool to determine current

performance in an organisation, is a key feature of the Criteria for Performance Excellence. The seven criteria are:

**Leadership** – focuses on how the personal actions of the senior leaders guide and sustain an organisation.

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

**Customer focus** – the main focus is on engagement with students and key stakeholders.

**Measurement, Analysis and Knowledge Management** – focuses on selection, gathering, analysis, management and improvement of data and information.

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

**Process management** - designing of work systems and contribution of key processes to value for students and stakeholders and achievement of success and sustainability within the organisation.

**Results/Outcomes** – focuses on overall performance and improvement in all key areas in the organisation, including student learning outcomes, customer focused outcomes and process effectiveness and leadership outcomes.

One of the main strengths of the Criteria is their alignment with each other, including the Results/Outcomes criteria. As an overarching guide for improvement this allows organisations to understand the “big picture” and to adopt an holistic approach to all aspects of the organisation (Education Criteria for Performance Excellence, 2009-2010).

There are a number of other improvement programmes, including Lean, Six Sigma, Business Process Re-engineering and Balanced Scorecard; the Criteria for Performance Excellence was deemed the best fit as an overarching system which could complement the new national quality system. Figure 2 outlines the Criteria for Performance Excellence as an overarching framework in relation to other models.

Some of the benefits of the criteria include:

- Internationally recognized;
- Guidelines specifically developed for education organisations;
- Whole of organization approach;
- Non- prescriptive – focus on asking the right questions rather than prescribe;
- Strong emphasis on an evaluative approach.

In addition to closer collaboration with a number of national organisations, the project group also investigated quality practices of overseas

education and quality organisations. One of these organisations was the Leicester College in the United Kingdom. This College currently has a strong focus to “Continually improve teaching, learning and support, leading to successful outcomes for learners” (Leicester College, 2010). A large university in South Australia was another example of an organisation with an integrated approach to quality assurance with systematic evaluation of performance, supported by an organisational commitment to improvement.

The EFQM Excellence Model is a non-prescriptive framework for organisational management systems and has been developed as an overarching framework to assist organisations to put an improvement plan in place to assist with the improvement of results/outcomes (Quality Scotland, 2009). Looking at other best practices nationally and internationally was extremely valuable in the decision making to develop a new improvement model for the organisation.

### **3.3 The result**

The Quality Management System was redeveloped and replaced by a framework which was branded as the WinQual Excellence Framework. The Framework is based on the Criteria for Performance Excellence as the overarching quality system, while the six key evaluation questions as developed by NZQA, formed an integral part of the Framework. The Framework governs continuous improvement and quality throughout the organisation. Through a

process of ongoing self assessment, individuals, groups and departments are able to focus on strengths and opportunities for improvement in two core components of the operation of the education organisation, namely

- Academic Excellence, based on academic delivery. Focus areas include:
  - Teaching and learning, Flexible delivery, E-capability, Internationalisation of the curriculum and Transfer of Credit.
- Service Excellence, based on service delivery and the wider student experience.

Focus areas include (Parasuraman et.al., 1988):

- Tangibles, Assurance, Reliability, Responsiveness and Empathy.

The WinQual Excellence Framework is summarized in Figure 3 below where:

- The seven criteria represent an overarching framework to support organisational performance and a culture of continuous improvement
- The six Key Evaluation Questions underpin the Framework and focus on the value of outcomes achieved in tertiary education as well as quality and value of key contributing processes

- The two side pillars represent the core activities of the education organisation with strong focus on academic development and delivery and organisational support to staff and students
- Embedded self assessment activities to gain evidence of and provide action plans for provision of quality education
- WinQual represents all activities in the organisation that contribute to quality.

#### 4. Conclusion

The design and implementation of a new Framework is seen as an important step for the organisation to ensure provision of academic programmes, teaching and support to students are at a high standard. It provides a platform for staff to review and monitor their activities on an ongoing basis and enable them to see how the results of various feedback mechanisms are being used to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement which can be used in planning cycles for the following year. The internal self assessment approach is a key component of the Framework and seen as an effective tool to engage staff and to focus positively on their activities and any external evaluation activities.

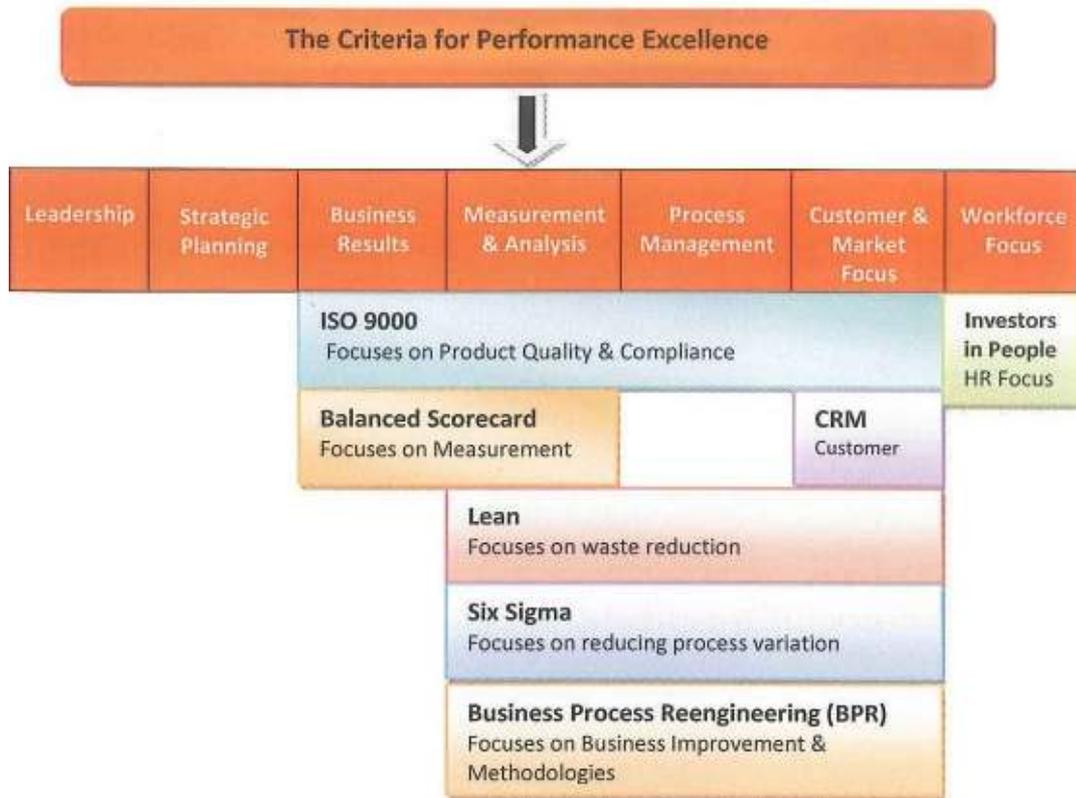
The new Framework aimed to align academic quality assurance of an education organisation with a new national quality assurance system. Early

indication is that the new Framework is effective in this alignment and that future quality assurance activities will be based primarily on self identification of areas for improvement.

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**Figure 2: The Criteria for Performance Excellence in relation to other quality models**

(Adapted from: Ministry of Economic Development, 2006, Education Criteria for Performance Excellence, 2009-2010).



**Figure 3: The WinQual Excellence Framework**

(WinQual Excellence Framework, 2010).