

A case study of embedding a culture of self-review and evaluation using evaluative conversations at Otago Polytechnic

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Abstract

During the last decade, the tertiary education sector in New Zealand moved from compliance driven audits to a model of quality assurance focused on evaluative conversations. In 2011 the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) recognised Otago Polytechnic as a top performing institution by confirming high confidence in educational performance and high confidence in self-assessment capability under the external evaluation and review process for Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs).

In this presentation we report on the steps involved, and the cultural shift needed, to embed systematic and robust self-review and evaluation throughout all levels of the organisation using evaluative conversations. We also outline the role of senior management and quality assurance staff in creating the impetus for change.

Achieving the shift required a sustained and enhanced focus on evaluative conversations based on the analysis of multiple sources of evidence based data and self-reflection. To strengthen transparency and support that shift we also developed a performance portal where all information relating to schools and service areas was accessible to all staff.

A strong focus and commitment from the senior leadership team, who assess their own processes and activities, and active support from staff across the institution were key factors in our ability to successfully embed rigorous self-assessment, evaluation and review processes within the culture of the organisation. We offer insights into our institutional experience and highlight the benefits for all stakeholders.

Key words: evaluative conversations, cultural change, self-review, evaluation, reflection

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Introduction

This paper is intended to offer evaluators and educators an insight into the key activities and actions that have resulted in Otago Polytechnic being recognised in 2011 by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) as a top performing institution by confirming a category one status under the external evaluation and review process for Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs). Otago Polytechnic is one of two ITPs in New Zealand to be awarded the top status by NZQA in the evaluation and review process started in 2011.

The paper reports on the processes and steps involved and the cultural shift undertaken to embed systematic and robust self-review and evaluation throughout all levels of the organisation including the role of senior management and quality assurance staff in creating the impetus for change.

The first section of the paper provides background on Otago Polytechnic and the evolution of how the institution has used student feedback data to inform quality assurance to being a key tool for evaluative conversations.

The second section discusses the organisational wide strategies that have been progressively implemented to bring about a shift in culture and thinking on evaluation and quality assurance.

The third section outlines the identified key success factors that have been undertaken to embed evaluative practices consistently across all areas of the organisation and which have resulted in Otago Polytechnic being recognised as a top performing category one institution.

Background

Who is Otago Polytechnic?

Otago Polytechnic traces its ancestry back to the Dunedin Technical School, which was established in 1889 to provide evening classes for working people. In 1921 the college took over the Dunedin School of Art, which had been established in 1870. The college expanded further by taking on the evening and day time education of apprentices, technicians and professionals. In 1966 the college was split into a secondary school and Otago Polytechnic which opened on 1 February 1966 (Dougherty 2006).

In 2012, Otago Polytechnic is one of 18 Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics in New Zealand offering applied vocational qualifications from foundation level Certificates to Bachelor and Masters degrees, with a strong focus on Health Sciences, Art, Design and Information Technology. More than 65% of all qualifications offered by the institution are at degree or higher level. It has its main campus in Dunedin with a regional campus in Cromwell and satellite campuses in Wanaka, Hamilton, Tauranga and Auckland. The organisation offers most of its programmes online and has a student body of about 7500 students and 520 permanent staff.

Quality assurance at Otago Polytechnic

From the mid-1990s, Otago Polytechnic has required academic schools to develop annual programme reports as part of an academic quality management system and audit process. Aligned to the process was a system of internal academic audit led by an Internal Academic Auditor. The audits focused on systems, compliance and effectiveness with the audit team responsible for the preparation of the audit report (Otago Polytechnic 1995).

The annual programme review reports included feedback on learner achievement, stakeholder relationships, changes to programmes, outcomes of moderation and monitoring and student evaluations. Overtime these reports evolved from an audit compliance nature to be focused on the effectiveness of the academic outcomes for learners. At the same time, all service areas were required to develop feedback strategies relating to customer service and other priorities with similar reporting requirements (Otago Polytechnic 1995).

Quality assurance framework for ITPs

In 2008, NZQA piloted a new quality assurance framework for tertiary education organisations including ITPs (NZQA 2009). Otago Polytechnic agreed to be part of the pilot and chose to use, as its focus, a whole of organisation approach to evaluation with the Annual Programme Evaluation Report as the key theme.

The new framework signalled a change in approach by NZQA who were seeking an independent judgement of the educational performance and capability in self-assessment for tertiary education organisations in New Zealand (NZQA 2009).

A key component of the quality assurance framework was a self-assessment approach which operates under the principle that “quality is best achieved when each tertiary education organisation has responsibility and ownership for improving its own outcomes, and quality assurance and improvement processes” (NZQA 2009).

Underpinning this self assessment and evaluative approach are six key evaluative questions as outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The Six Key Evaluative Questions

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?

(NZQA, 2009)

At the same time as NZQA was shifting from compliance audits to evaluative conversations Otago Polytechnic was undertaking a similar shift in its thinking and approach to measuring and evaluating performance. This new approach by NZQA to quality assurance resonated strongly with Otago Polytechnic’s approach to, and practice of, self assessment and evaluation across the whole organisation. The

Otago Polytechnic's strategic priorities and annual evaluation reporting cycle had close alignment with the six key evaluative questions and the concept of using evaluative conversations as tools for evaluating performance.

Evaluative conversations

Evaluative conversations are used to explore the meaning and context of the self-assessment information in order to answer the key evaluation questions. Evaluative conversations provide a mechanism to understand the quantitative and qualitative data and how it has been interpreted and used by the TEO, particularly as this may not be recorded formally in records and reports (NZQA 2009).

As noted by Davidson (2005) what makes evaluative conversations different from informal everyday conversations is the setting in which the evaluation occurs, the people involved (an evaluator and client) and the content of their conversation. The conversations are more than a description of what is happening - they extend to a discussion of why it matters and what its impacts are and what might need to be done about it (NZQA 2009).

Using feedback from students to inform quality processes

Centralised systems of gathering and analysing student feedback data have been the norm in higher education institutions for many years. The earliest documented use of student evaluation of teaching was at University of Washington in 1926, initiated by psychologist E.T. Guthrie who administered the Purdue Rating Scale of Instruction. This student survey represented a shift in operational ethics at Washington University, from the benevolent autocracy ethic of Victorian education to the individual's right to informed consent ethic of America in the 1920s. However, it wasn't until the late 1960s and early 1970s that student evaluation of teaching began to have more widespread use in colleges and universities in the USA (Murray 2005).

As the higher education sector became an increasingly competitive market, university student satisfaction was seen as an important component of quality assurance by the institutions. Assessing student satisfaction provides a way that universities can focus directly on issues of quality development in order to ensure that educational standards are high (Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker, & Grogard 2002).

In Australia, Graduate Careers Australia has been gathering data from students through the Australian Graduate Survey and the Course Experience Questionnaire since 1972 (www.deewr.gov.au). By the 1980s, higher education institutions in New Zealand were introducing student evaluation of teaching through end-of-course surveys to evaluate teacher performance and provide data to develop and monitor courses (King and Fraser 2005). From the mid-1990s tertiary education institutions in New Zealand started a more systematic approach to gathering data from graduates and students about their overall experiences and to use this data as one measure to evaluate the quality of programmes provided (University of Otago 2012). Today, the practice of gathering data from students is well established in most tertiary institutions in New Zealand and throughout the world.

The tools, strategies and key success factors

Seeking and evaluating feedback from students and the development of a range of strategies within Otago Polytechnic has enabled it to shift the culture to one where evaluation, reflection and self review are at its core. This section discusses the development of how student feedback has been used to provide evidence for evaluation and self review practices, and the strategies implemented to embed this shift.

Student feedback at Otago Polytechnic

In the mid-1990s Dr Nirwan Idrus, (1996) the then CEO of Otago Polytechnic, was looking at how the principals of total quality management, including feedback mechanisms, could be applied to a tertiary education setting.

The Otago Polytechnic Management Manual of September 1995 established the foundations for the institution's quality management system through three key bodies - the Academic Board, the Management Team and academic department Boards of Studies. Each academic department established Boards of Studies who were responsible for developing policies, objectives and performance criteria to measure the quality of the teaching and student satisfaction within programme content and delivery (Otago Polytechnic Management Manual 1995).

The recognition of collecting evaluative data was further developed in the business plan of December 1999, which talked among other things, about a Polytechnic in the future needing to have a "student focused campus". This focus was driven by political and competitive market forces taking place within the New Zealand tertiary education sector at that time, as well as an internal driver to be more cost effective in times of financial constraints. Student satisfaction surveys were used to measure if students felt they were treated as adults, with the process managed at academic department levels (Otago Polytechnic Business Plan December 1999). However, not every academic school collected data from its students and for those that did, sometimes little action was undertaken as a result of the feedback.

The decision to manage the collection and analysis of student feedback on teaching, programmes and overall satisfaction centrally began in the early 2000s (Otago Polytechnic 2001) and by 2006 most courses related to degree programmes were reported centrally. The following year, accountability for how academic schools responded to feedback was introduced. Each academic school was required to report on actions taken to address negative feedback from students about a particular course and programme (Otago Polytechnic 2006).

In 2009, standardised course evaluation and student feedback on teaching questionnaires were introduced, together with a requirement for all students to be given the opportunity to provide satisfaction feedback on their year of learning at Otago Polytechnic (Otago Polytechnic 2009). To further enhance the feedback mechanisms from students, a range of other feedback opportunities were introduced such as participating in the Australasian University Student Engagement Survey in 2010, giving students access to an online tool to voice their complaints and comments and undertaking deeper analysis of data from graduates who had completed their qualifications.

The processes and steps for seeking feedback from students have now evolved to a point where there are deliberate and planned actions to seek feedback from students on all teachers, courses, programmes and the institution overall.

Developing a strategic framework for quality

The evaluation of the data from students is one of the foundations that underpin the evaluative conversations. At the same time as student feedback was being more systematically gathered and listened to, a number of strategies and actions were implemented by the current Chief Executive of Otago Polytechnic to focus the whole organisation on quality. Actions included a multi-faceted approach that included manager development programmes, project work teams made up of staff from across the institution focusing on strategic priorities and a refined academic quality strategy. The strategy focused on using feedback from students and stakeholders to develop a culture of reflection by using peer, customer and student feedback as evidence. While the process was aligned to the NZQA Quality Assurance Framework, it was contextualised to the operating environment of Otago Polytechnic.

2008 to 2012 Strategic Plan

The main thrust for the change was the strategic plan for 2008-2012 that was based on themes of inspiring capability, building capability and being a learner-centred organisation acting with integrity and guided by a set of institutional specific values of excellence, partnership, caring, learning and responsibility (Otago Polytechnic 2008). As part of this strategy, a number of actions steps were progressively undertaken to move the culture of the organisation to one more focused on quality and excellence at the core of its business and to create an environment where Otago Polytechnic achieves its aim of being recognised as one of New Zealand's top performing polytechnics.

Strategic focus on Learning and Teaching: Lifting our game

In 2008, the message from the Chief Executive was about developing a very strong culture centred on excellence in teaching and learning. A number of initiatives were implemented a 'Quality Improvement Team' made up of staff across the institution who were: to identify and promulgate successful teaching and learning strategies across the Polytechnic, changing the role of Principal Lecturers to support other teachers across the organisation in research, and teaching and devolving programme management to programme leaders who were expected to be accountable for teaching and learning outcomes in their academic programme areas (Otago Polytechnic 2008).

Increasing the focus on measuring academic performance to enable prompt and decisive evidence-based action, lifting the capability of teachers and requiring higher levels of accountability were identified as the key actions needed to support this strategy.

Encouraging self-review and reflection

A focus on self-assessment and reflection to build personal capabilities began in 2009 and was implemented across all levels of Otago Polytechnic, including the

governing council. The Otago Polytechnic council members used an online tool to self reflect on their individual performance and the effectiveness of the council overall both in terms of its governance activity and on decision-making (Otago Polytechnic 2011)

Senior and operational managers participated in a personal leadership and self-development programme, a 360 degree feedback from staff, peers, and managers together to develop skills at self-evaluation and were provided with one-on-one coaching from an external management coach. Senior managers and operational managers also participated in regular retreats to reflect on performance and achievements, and focus on what the future might look like for the organisation.

The opportunity to participate in the self development programme was extended to all staff in 2010, as a way to embed self review and reflection as being an important attribute for all staff at Otago Polytechnic.

Feedback from participants indicated they recognised value from the self development programme, and 360 degree feedback especially, to create personal action plans for self-improvement, greater awareness of individual strengths and weaknesses both for self and for others, and the facilitated reflection process with its regular monitoring of progress on achieving the agreed outcomes (S. Thompson Personal Communication August 2012).

In addition, feedback from peers, students and customers was encouraged by all staff to use as evidence to reflect on their individual teaching or service performance depending on their role.

Moving from good to great

In 2010, a theme of good to great was used for a number of institution wide projects. The good to great theme was based on the organisational excellence concepts that there was no miracle moment. Collins (2001) says there is no one tactic for moving an organisation from good to great. Instead a down-to-earth, pragmatic, committed to excellence process keeps each company, its leaders, and its people on track for the long haul.

When Otago Polytechnic assessed itself against the criteria defined by Collins in 2010, it was evident the institution was good in many areas but needed to still identify how to become great. Assessments took place in a number of forms including workshops for all staff held on organisation wide development days, workshops by academic and service area managers and by focused discussions undertaken by senior management (Otago Polytechnic 2010). From those assessments a number of actions and steps were identified with teams continuing to work on a wide range of strategies.

Excellence is embedded as a core value. How well the organisation, individual academic schools and service areas and staff live that value is measured in the annual staff satisfaction survey (Otago Polytechnic Work Environment Trend Analysis, 2011).

The Performance Portal

In 2010, Otago Polytechnic implemented an in-house online system called the Performance Portal which is an online Business Intelligence Tool. The portal

captures all the raw data held in a number of organisational databases and enables academic schools and service areas to view and measure their performance in a wide range of key performance areas. Prior to the portal being developed, the collating and analysing of data was a cumbersome manual task.

The portal give everyone at Otago Polytechnic access to all the data collected and held and enables individual academic schools and service areas to easily analyse how well business plans objectives and intentions are being met (G Reihana, personal discussion, August 2012).

The performance portal has been a pivotal tool to start evaluative conversations at all levels of the organisation. Schools and service areas have ready access to all feedback reports and performance data, to use as evidence and preparation for the evaluative conversation during the annual programme and service area review presentation. Providing access to everyone within the institution to all data has created opportunities to benchmark and compare results horizontally and vertically within Otago Polytechnic.

The performance portal has been embraced by staff across Otago Polytechnic and been a fundamental process that has created a culture of openness and transparency.

Closing the loop

As Leckey and Neill (2001) argue “closing the loop is an important issue in terms of total quality management. If students do not see any action resulting from their feedback, they may become sceptical and unwilling to participate.” The key to effective institution wide surveys is ensuring that the loop is effectively closed.

Updates in Otago Polytechnic policies (2010) relating to student feedback, encouraged reports to be provided to students and stakeholders on the actions taken as a result of the feedback provided.

The process of closing the loop with feedback was considered as something that should take place at all levels of the institution. For example, feedback from the outcomes of the annual review process for individual academic schools and service areas and the results from the annual staff satisfaction survey were made available to all staff at Otago Polytechnic on the performance portal.

Benchmarking

Benneworth (2010) notes that benchmarking is a powerful modern management tool which, through self assessment and a structured comparative institutional learning approach, provides higher education institutions with crucial information to increase the quality of their institutional development and their strategic performance. While many benchmarking exercises stop with the next steps of data collection and reporting of the results, Otago Polytechnic moved to the implementation of an action plan and the monitoring of performance improvement within annual review and evaluative processes.

In 2010, Otago Polytechnic participated for the first time in two benchmarking processes to measure and compare its performance. These were the Baldrige Framework for Performance Excellence (National Institute of Standards and

Technology, 2010) and the Australasian University Student Engagement Survey (Australian Council for Educational Research 2012).

The Baldrige Framework for Performance Excellence enables an organisation to self assess and measure progress on educational excellence, service excellence and business excellence. It establishes criteria for evaluating improvement efforts and shares best practices (NIST 2012).

An evaluation conducted in 2011 enabled the comparison of, and reflection on, areas for targeting improvement. The focus on working towards a Baldrige award has been taken on by a group of champions within the organisation which fits into the Strategic priorities of the organisation to be the top performing polytechnic in New Zealand in all aspects of its academic activities (Garlick 2011).

The Australasian University Student Engagement Survey has been operating since 2007 and it seeks opinions from students on the interactions they have with their institution. The data collected provides participating institutions with outcomes in comparison with aggregated and “like” groupings in New Zealand, Australia and North America (Australian Council for Educational Research 2012).

Along with a number of other Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics in New Zealand, Otago Polytechnic participated for the first time in the survey in 2010 and again in 2011 and 2012. The outcomes from the survey are used by the institution and individual academic schools as key inputs into their evaluative conversations and to measure their performance.

Key success factors

Achieving the highest performance ratings of category one in the NZQA external evaluation and review process was the result of implementing and acting on a number of clearly identified actions steps. Evaluative conversations were one of the key steps used to embed self review and reflection throughout the organisation. The six actions identified in this section collectively contributed to a major change in focus for Otago Polytechnic and a drive to achieve its aim to be the top performing polytechnic in New Zealand.

Strategic direction and leadership

The leadership from the Chief Executive has been pivotal to Otago Polytechnic achieving a top rating for its external review and self evaluation process. The Chief Executive ensured that strategic direction included a focus on quality, with evaluation embedded at all stages. Together with the senior leadership team, he has created a vision, mission, values and distinctive character for Otago Polytechnic and made these accessible and applicable to all staff.

A key strategic decision was to create the position of Director of Quality within the senior management team to champion quality in all strategic thinking within the organisation. This Director also has responsibility for building institutional capability in evaluation and that reflective practice is a key component of the institution’s quality strategy.

Organisational structure

Otago Polytechnic has a small Quality team, led by the Director of Quality, which has two key roles. One role is to offer leadership and framework support to individual academic schools and service areas, to enable them to make use of the available data to evaluate educational programmes, the learning environment and service provision. The second role is to centrally manage the collection and analysis of data from students and stakeholders and to assist academic schools and service area to make sense of the data. Otago Polytechnic is one of the few ITPs in New Zealand to have a role dedicated to the central collection, management and dissemination of all feedback from stakeholders.

For many years Otago Polytechnic had a dedicated Academic Auditor whose focus was to undertake audits and monitoring at predefined intervals. With the move to an evaluative approach the role changed to that of an Internal Evaluator with a focus on working collaboratively with academic school and service area staff to develop evaluative practices applicable to the type of learning and culture within that particular academic school or service area. Once the culture of evaluation started to embed within Otago Polytechnic the role was disestablished and the responsibility for evaluation was placed within each individual academic school and service area. Evaluation was now the responsibility of everyone – as members of self-managing teams (S Thompson, Personal Communication August 2012).

Organisational focus on quality

Alongside the need to achieve the requirements of the external evaluation and review procedures Otago Polytechnic has continued to pay attention and remain focused on its own internal accountability evaluation procedures. The procedures use evidence to answer the reflective questions of - what is the information telling us, what does this mean and how can this lead to improvement?

Figure 2 represents a conceptual model of Otago Polytechnic's current quality strategy, which has evolved from a complex set of criteria and standards to this overarching diagram with quality at the centre supported by five key actions that are informed by evidence, and a process of continual improvement facilitated through evaluative conversations.



Figure 2 Otago Polytechnic Quality Strategy

Communications

For the last eight years, Otago Polytechnic has undertaken an annual staff satisfaction survey. Included in that survey are questions related to leadership, communication, values and vision. Staff feedback from recent surveys showed that senior management needed to improve its level of communication within the organisation. Strategies implemented towards improvement have been conversation based and include activities such as shared lunches, and visits by senior management to academic schools and service areas to engage with staff and discuss strategies. Members of the senior management team are always present at all annual review meetings and manager development workshops and engage in the discussions and debate. These strategies align closely with the concept of Groysberg & Slind (2012), that leadership is a conversation where the key elements of intimacy, interactivity, inclusion and intent are essential in the new model of organisational conversation between leadership and staff.

A key communication tool for the institution has been the creation of the performance portal that enables all staff within the institution to view all evidential data held. The performance portal provides evidence in one central location to support evaluative conversation in many forums including the summative annual programme and service area review presentation.

Annual programme and service area review

Each year the parameters of the annual review process are discussed and finalised to ensure that the institution's strategic priorities are evaluated alongside the six NZQA key evaluation questions with emphasis on the organisational context.

The annual programme and service area review consists of a presentation and conversation from all staff within each academic school or service area to the whole of the senior management team on the effectiveness of their performance against key performance indicators.

The key performance indicators used in the Annual Review process are based on NZQA's six key evaluation questions, and other organisational specific indicators aligned with organisational strategic imperatives such as teaching and learning, the

implementation of a Maori strategic framework, education for sustainability and on the quality of the working environment. Each year evaluative questioning techniques are refined with academic schools and service areas provided with evaluative rubrics for self-assessment. A summary report is provided back to each academic school and service area reflecting their own self rating against each rubric and the rating of by the senior management team based on the evidence provided in the presentation and from the evaluative conversation.

Leading the discussion

Otago Polytechnic actively participated in a number of projects and processes to increase its capability of evaluation and self review. These activities included participating in the NZQA external evaluation and review trial workshop for Lead Evaluators. As a result of this, a staff member who had considerable evaluation experience was also contracted by NZQA as external evaluator.

Together with Ako Aotearoa – National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence and NZQA, Otago Polytechnic hosted a Self-Assessment Conference at the end of 2010 with the theme of Self Assessment for Quality: How do you know good when you see it? The conference focused on unpacking the six key evaluative questions used in the New Zealand Quality Assurance Framework. Many Otago Polytechnic staff led workshops and participated throughout the two days. This provided opportunities for staff across the organisation to be exposed to the thinking of evaluative conversations and self-assessment.

Participating in the workshop, having a staff become a lead evaluator and co-hosting the conference were key milestones to build capability for evaluation and self review within Otago Polytechnic. It also demonstrated to staff that the institution was committed to this approach to evaluation and saw it as a core component to its success.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how Otago Polytechnic achieved a top category rating for its own external review and evaluation by NZQA and then contextualised the process to embed a culture of reflection and self review into its own operating environment and culture. Key to the success of the implementation has been the strategic leadership from the Chief Executive and Director of Quality, taking a whole of institution approach where evaluation is seen as part of business as usual and not a one off event and using evaluative conversations based on openly accessible and available institutional data.

These insights are offered as an example of how one tertiary institution in New Zealand has taken a whole of institution approach to quality, used evaluation, evaluative conversations and self review as tools of gaining the highest possible rating from NZQA in the external evaluation and review process and to achieve its aim of being recognised as the top performing polytechnic in New Zealand.

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