



Principles of self-evaluation

About this document

Estyn and QAA are currently working jointly on a Medr-funded project looking at self-evaluation and continuous improvement in the tertiary sectors. We are establishing a baseline of understanding of how providers across the tertiary sectors carry out self-evaluation, developing a set of principles to support providers and identifying examples of effective practice that can be shared.

This is a draft version of the principles, for discussion with the sector during Autumn 2025 and Spring 2026. **It is not for publication or wider dissemination**

Context

Self-evaluation plays a vital role in assuring and enhancing the quality of provision across the tertiary sectors. A shared set of self-evaluation principles can support greater alignment between regulatory and quality bodies, reduce duplication, and encourage more meaningful, reflective practice.

Effective self-evaluation should go beyond a description of activities to offer thoughtful, evidence-based judgements about their impact, particularly in relation to the quality of learners' experiences, institutional strategy, and broader organisational effectiveness.

The following principles provide a flexible but coherent framework to support providers in producing a purposeful self-evaluation that is proportionate, learner-focused, and improvement-led. While not prescriptive, each principle should be considered as part of any robust self-evaluation process.

12 Key principles of self-evaluation

1. Learner-focused

Self-evaluation should be centred on how provision supports learners' achievement, well-being, and progression. Evaluations should be based on how effectively the provider's work is making a difference to learners' experiences and outcomes.

This ensures the process remains grounded in the ultimate purpose of education, supporting learners to succeed and thrive. Focusing on learners helps providers align resources and strategies to what matters most.

2. Evaluative, not descriptive

The process should focus on whether approaches are effective, not just what is being done. Providers should offer clear, evidence-based evaluations about quality and performance, identifying what works well and what needs improvement.

This adds rigour to the process and helps providers avoid surface-level reporting. A strong evaluative stance enables more meaningful judgements and sharper improvement planning.

3. Evidence-based

Conclusions should be grounded in credible, triangulated evidence drawn from multiple sources, including external perspectives or national and international comparators where appropriate. Data, observations, feedback and other forms of insight could be used to demonstrate impact and support informed decision-making.

Using robust evidence builds trust in the findings and ensures they can be defended, shared, and acted upon. It also supports consistency and depth across different parts of the provider's work.

4. Impact-led

Self-evaluation should focus on the actual outcomes of activity, not just the processes or intentions behind it. Providers should critically assess what has changed as a result of their work, particularly for learners, and use evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness and value of their approaches.

This shifts the focus from activity to improvement. It helps ensure that energy and investment are directed towards approaches that make a meaningful difference.

5. Action-oriented

Self-evaluation should be a continuous process and inform clear, purposeful actions that respond to the findings. These actions should be realistic, targeted, and designed to enhance quality, with mechanisms in place to monitor their implementation and evaluate their impact over time.

This principle supports a culture of continuous improvement. It reinforces that self-evaluation is not a standalone exercise, but one that leads to visible change.

6. Learner-engaged

Learners should be engaged meaningfully in the process, not just consulted. Their contributions should help shape the evaluation's findings and priorities, with evidence of how their perspectives have influenced decisions and outcomes.

Partnering with learners brings valuable insight and supports shared ownership of improvement. It also strengthens trust, transparency, and the quality of outcomes.

7. Stakeholder-inclusive

The process should actively involve those with a meaningful stake in the provider's work. Their insights provide depth and challenge, build shared ownership, and enhance the validity of the evaluation.

Self-evaluation informed by a range of voices broadens perspective and strengthens the provider's connection with its wider community.

8. Transparent and honest

Self-evaluation should be open, balanced, and non-defensive. It should acknowledge both strengths and areas for development and demonstrate how reflective practice leads to improvement.

Transparency builds credibility. A culture of honest self-evaluation lays the foundation for trust, external assurance, and meaningful change.

9. Values- and strategy-aligned

Evaluations should reflect how the provider's values, strategic priorities, and core aims are enacted in practice. Providers should explore the alignment between their stated mission and the actual impact of their provision.

This supports coherence across the organisation. It helps ensure that evaluation isn't just compliance-led, but genuinely supports strategic direction and cultural integrity.

10. Purposeful and proportionate

The scope and level of detail should reflect the provider's size, complexity, and context. Self-evaluation should be manageable and meaningful, providing insight without unnecessary duplication. Reports should be concise, accessible to a range of audiences, and tailored to the provider's size, complexity, and context.

Taking a proportionate approach makes the process sustainable and focused. It avoids overwhelming staff and ensures attention is given to areas of highest value.

11. Governance-embedded

Senior leaders and governing bodies should play an active role in shaping, reviewing, and responding to self-evaluation. Their oversight ensures that findings inform the provider's strategy and drive improvement.

Embedding self-evaluation in governance processes gives it weight and influence. It helps ensure that evaluation informs long-term planning, resource allocation, and institutional accountability.

12. Welsh context-aware

Self-evaluation should consider the provider’s contribution to the Welsh education landscape, including national policy priorities, bilingual or Welsh-medium provision, and relevant legislative requirements.

Recognising the Welsh context ensures relevance and alignment with national aims. It supports providers to demonstrate their role in shaping and responding to Wales’s educational priorities.

Summary

When carried out effectively, self-evaluation provides a powerful tool for improvement, accountability, and strategic development. Especially for those providers operating across sectors, a shared set of principles supports a more coherent, efficient, and meaningful approach. It allows providers to focus on what matters most: the quality of the learner experience and the impact of their provision. By aligning high-level expectations and approaches across the tertiary sectors, this model aims to reduce duplication, encourage collaboration, and promote a common language for quality improvement that is responsive both to providers’ priorities and national expectations.