

Self-evaluation and continuous improvement in the tertiary system in Wales

12 Key principles of self-evaluation

1. Learner-focused

**2. Evaluative, not
descriptive**

3. Evidence-based

4. Impact-led

5. Action-oriented

6. Learner-engaged

**7. Stakeholder-
inclusive**

**8. Transparent and
honest**

**9. Values- and
strategy-aligned**

**10. Welsh
context-aware**

**11. Purposeful and
proportionate**

**12. Governance-
embedded**

1. Learner-focused

Self-evaluation is centred on how provision supports learners' achievement, well-being, and progression. Evaluations are 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 focuses on whether approaches are effective, not just what is being done. Providers 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 are 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 are used to demonstrate impact and support informed decision-making.

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

4. Impact-led

Self-evaluation is focussed on the actual outcomes of activity, not just the processes or intentions behind it. Providers 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 is a continuous process and inform clear, purposeful actions that respond to the findings. These actions are realistic, targeted, and designed to enhance quality, with mechanisms in place to monitor their implementation and evaluate their impact.

This principle supports a culture of continuous improvement. It reinforces that self-evaluation is not a standalone exercise or an end in itself, but one that leads to visible and sustained change.

6. Learner-engaged

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

Working 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 actively involves 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 is open, balanced, and non-defensive, acknowledging both strengths and areas for development.

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

9. Values- and strategy-aligned

Evaluations reflect how the provider's values, strategic priorities, and core aims are enacted in practice. Providers 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. Welsh context-aware

Self-evaluation considers the provider's contribution to the Welsh education landscape, including national policy and economic priorities, bilingualism and Welsh-medium provision, relevant legislative requirements and Wales' international context.

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

11. Purposeful and proportionate

The scope and level of detail reflects the provider's size, complexity, and context. Self-evaluation is manageable and provides insight without unnecessary duplication.

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

12. Governance-embedded

'Governing bodies' play an active role in 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.

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 framing high-level expectations and approaches in a shared way across the tertiary sectors, this model aims to encourage collaboration, and promote a common language for quality improvement that is responsive both to providers' priorities and national expectations.

Reflective questions

Our aim is that providers will be able to use the principles to reflect on their self-evaluation and continuous improvement processes. These questions can be applied at a range of levels within a provider, within delivery teams or at strategic level, are aligned to each principle and are intended to stimulate reflection and discussion. They are not regulatory requirements or an exhaustive list and can be tailored by providers to meet their needs.

1. Learner-focused

- How clearly does our self-evaluation demonstrate the difference our provision makes to learners' experiences, outcomes, and progression, rather than focusing primarily on processes, activities, or compliance?
- How well do we use learners' perspectives to shape our self-evaluation, and how confident are we that these perspectives reflect the diversity of our learner population?
- In what ways does our self-evaluation identify and explore variation in learners' experiences and outcomes across courses, modes of study, and learner groups?
- How effectively does our self-evaluation link learners' experiences to the decisions we make about curriculum design, support, assessment, and resource allocation?
- How well do we evaluate the impact of our improvement actions on learners, and how do we know whether changes have genuinely improved learners' achievement, wellbeing, or progression?
- How well does our self-evaluation capture learners' experiences at key transition points (for example entry, progression between levels or years, and exit), and what does this tell us about how effectively we support learners to succeed over time?
- How confident are we that our self-evaluation reflects what it is genuinely like to be a learner at our institution, and how do we test or challenge our assumptions where learner evidence is mixed or uncomfortable?

2. Evaluative, not descriptive

- To what extent does our self-evaluation judge the effectiveness of our approaches, rather than simply describing activities or processes?
- What evidence do we use to evaluate the impact of our provision on outcomes for learners, and how well does this evidence support our key judgements?
- How clearly do we identify which approaches are most effective, for whom, and in what contexts; and which are less effective?
- Where our evaluation identifies areas for improvement or inconsistency, how precisely do we explain why these exist and what needs to change?

- How well do our evaluative judgements focus on quality and performance over time, rather than one-off initiatives or recent actions?
- How consistently do leaders and staff use agreed criteria or benchmarks to make secure, shared judgements about effectiveness?
- How effectively does our self-evaluation inform prioritised, measurable improvement actions and sharpen our planning for improvement?

3. Evidence-based

- How well are our evaluations supported by credible, triangulated evidence drawn from a range of sources (for example data, observations, feedback and professional dialogue)?
- To what extent do we test our conclusions by comparing evidence from different perspectives, such as learners, staff, partners, external peer reviewers or external stakeholders?
- How effectively do we use performance data and other intelligence to demonstrate impact over time, rather than relying on isolated snapshots?
- How well do we use external benchmarks, pooled data from other providers, national published data or international comparators to strengthen the validity of our judgements?
- How consistent is the quality and use of evidence across different areas of our provision, and where are there gaps or weaknesses that need addressing?
- How confident are we that our evidence base would withstand external scrutiny and clearly justify the conclusions we have reached?
- How well does our use of evidence inform timely, well-targeted decisions and actions for improvement across the range of our provision?

4. Impact-led

- What differences has our improvement work made to outcomes for learners, and how clearly can we demonstrate this through evidence?
- How well does our self-evaluation distinguish between what we do and the impact it has, particularly where approaches have not led to the intended improvements?
- Which aspects of our provision have had the greatest positive impact on learners, and what evidence shows why these approaches are effective?
- Where impact has been limited or inconsistent, how honestly do we evaluate this and adapt our approaches accordingly?
- How effectively do we track impact over time to ensure that improvements are sustained and not short-term or superficial?
- To what extent does our evaluation consider differential impact, for example on different groups of learners or areas of provision?

- How well do our impact-led evaluations inform decisions about where to prioritise resources, effort and improvement actions?

5. Action-oriented

- How clearly does our self-evaluation identify priority actions that respond directly to the key findings and areas for improvement?
- To what extent are our improvement actions realistic, focused and proportionate to the issues identified through self-evaluation?
- How effectively do we translate evaluative findings into clear plans with defined responsibilities, timescales and success criteria?
- What systems do we have in place to monitor the implementation of improvement actions, and how consistently are these used?
- How well do we evaluate the impact of our actions on quality and outcomes, rather than simply checking whether actions have been completed?
- How regularly do we revisit and update our self-evaluation in the light of the impact of improvement actions and emerging evidence?
- How visible is the link between self-evaluation, improvement planning and demonstrable change for learners and other stakeholders?

6. Learner-engaged

- How actively are learners involved in shaping our self-evaluation, beyond responding to surveys or consultations?
- In what ways do learners contribute to forming our judgements about strengths and areas for development?
- How do we ensure that learner voice reflects a broad and representative range of experiences and backgrounds?
- What clear examples can we provide to show how learners' views have influenced our findings, priorities or improvement actions?
- How do we create safe and inclusive opportunities for learners to express honest feedback, including where provision may be weaker?
- To what extent do learners understand the outcomes of the self-evaluation process and see the impact of their contributions?
- How does working with learners enhance the quality of our evaluation and strengthen shared ownership of improvement?

7. Stakeholder-inclusive

- Which stakeholders do we regard as having a meaningful stake in our provision, and how have we identified them as such and prioritised them accordingly?

- How do learners and staff across the institution and in different roles currently engage with our stakeholders, and how might we all be more effective in doing so?
- Do we engage with our stakeholders frequently enough to build ongoing shared ownership of the outcomes that matter to both parties?
- How sure are we that we have a shared understanding of our mutual goals with our stakeholders, to ensure that their feedback supports the validity of our self-evaluation?
- To what extent do we enjoy mutual trust with our stakeholders, such that we can be sure that they would feel confident to challenge us, and that we would welcome their challenge?
- How visible is the link between our stakeholders' feedback, our decision-making and the impact on our learners?
- Might there be potential stakeholders whose insights would be beneficial to us, but with whom we're yet to engage (perhaps because they're harder to reach)? If so, what plans do we have to reach out to them?

8. Transparent and honest

- How well does our self-evaluation present a balanced picture of our provision, giving appropriate weight to what is working well and what needs to improve?
- How well does our culture support honest self-evaluation as a routine and valued part of improvement, rather than an activity driven by external scrutiny?
- How do we ensure that weaknesses are acknowledged constructively and used as opportunities for learning rather than sources of defensiveness or justification?
- In what ways do staff, learners and other stakeholders contribute to our self-evaluation, and how does this help us avoid a defensive or overly narrow perspective?
- How transparent are our self-evaluation processes and findings to staff, learners, governors, and partners, and how does this openness build trust? Consider who has access to self-evaluation information and how it is shared and discussed.
- What evidence do we use to support our judgements about strengths and areas for development, and how accessible and transparent is this evidence to others?
- Where have we been most honest about areas of underperformance, and how clearly do we understand and explain the underlying causes rather than attributing them to external factors alone?
- How confident are we that an external audience would recognise our self-evaluation as honest and credible, even where it highlights uncomfortable issues?

9. Values- and strategy-aligned

- How confident are we that learners, staff and stakeholders can identify our values and strategic priorities, and articulate how these translate into our approach to self-evaluation?
- Which of our values and strategic priorities are most visible in what we measure, monitor and reflect on in self-evaluation, and which are less so?
- Are there areas in which our values and strategic priorities seem more aspirational than achievable, or where it isn't clear how we would evaluate our impact?
- How confident are we that different teams working within our institution have a shared understanding of our values and strategic priorities?
- To what degree are different teams empowered to ensure that what they measure and monitor in self-evaluation reflects our values and strategic priorities – rather than only responding to immediate reporting requirements?
- To what degree do our values and strategic priorities feature in discussions around how we interpret data and other evidence of our impact?
- To what degree are we able to show a direct link between our values and strategic aims and our impact?
- If an external observer were to look only at the impact of our provision, would they be able to identify the core aims underpinning it?

10. Welsh context-aware

- What is our understanding of our institution's contribution to the Welsh education landscape?
- How do we show our understanding of our place in the Welsh education landscape in (for instance) strategic policy documents that we publish?
- Do our administrative processes that support self-evaluation (for instance, quality assurance processes and data collection) accurately reflect our understanding of where we sit in the Welsh education landscape? If not, how can we modify them so that they do?
- Can colleagues across the institution – not only senior leaders - articulate which legislative requirements are important to us (for instance, the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015)?
- Reflecting on Wales' place in the world, what is our understanding of our role as an institution not only within Wales, but also in the UK as a whole, and internationally?
- How do we ensure that learners and colleagues with global aspirations - for instance, to learn, work or collaborate internationally – have access to these opportunities?
- To what extent do our learners actually use, practice or develop their Welsh language skills while they learn with us?

- How can we show that we're being effective in championing a culture that values and encourages bilingualism – rather than simply complying with the Welsh Language Standards?
- Can colleagues across the institution (not only those who are Welsh-speaking or who work through the medium of Welsh) identify what Welsh-medium provision we offer, and which services are currently available to learners bilingually?
- What steps we are taking to grow Welsh-medium provision and bilingual services for learners? How are we monitoring our progress?

11. Purposeful and proportionate

- Have we identified from the outset what impact we are seeking to demonstrate, and what specific evidence we need to collect to do so?
- Is our self-evaluation sufficiently detailed to give us an accurate picture of our impact, without being so time-consuming that it diverts time and resources away from delivering impact?
- When conducting 'deep dives' into the evidence of our impact on specific themes of interest, how confident are we that this is adding value?
- How do we ensure that colleagues in different teams enjoy the capacity necessary to reflect meaningfully on the impact of their work, and to contribute to the institution's self-evaluation?
- Which resources might colleagues in different teams need access to in order to evaluate their impact locally?
- Have we identified opportunities to reduce duplication - both in the collation of evidence, and in using that evidence in self-evaluation?
- Where we have limited capacity to engage in self-evaluation, how do we identify our priority areas of impact, and how confident are we in our choices?

12. Governance-embedded

- What opportunities, and at what stages in delivery and reporting cycles, does our governing body have to engage with our self-evaluation and understand our impact; and to feed back accordingly?
- How do we ensure that members of the governing body have opportunities to gain a sufficiently detailed strategic understanding of our core aims, without overwhelming them with operational detail?
- When reporting on our self-evaluation and impact to our governing body, how clear is the link between our values and strategic aims; our self-evaluation activities; and the impact reported?
- How confident are we that our self-evaluation and reported impact provides our governing body with the insight that they need to plan for the long term and make significant resourcing decisions?

- How confident are we that our self-evaluation offers the governing body an honest assessment of our capacity to meet formal accountability requirements (for instance, regulatory or contractual obligations)?
- Are there opportunities to engage with the governing body on how we might present our self-evaluation in ways that are more useful to them, to support strategic decision-making, planning and oversight?