

Getting self-assessment reports right

This guidance note is intended to help any learning and skills provider, whether a single sector subject area apprenticeship independent learning provider or a complex 15 area general further education college, in the self-assessment process. When correctly applied, the ideas represented have brought about improvements in the service to learners in a number of organisations and have made staff more aware of best practice in both the quality improvement and self-assessment processes.

Introduction

In an ideal world self-assessment reports should be produced on an annual basis, generally at the same time each year, and be the result of quality improvement activities over the previous year. Ofsted are expecting you to send them your SAR by the following January for the academic year in question. Most colleges and providers are in a final draft form by the end of November. Your self-assessment should address the key questions of the current *Common Inspection Framework* which seems to change once every three years under Ofsted because of political pressures and an obsession with having one framework to fit all that they inspect. There should be an associated quality improvement plan (also referred to as action/development plans) that arises from the report and focuses on maintaining strengths and addressing weaknesses (I steer away from using 'areas for improvement' as weaknesses sums up better an aspect that needs improvement in order for a learner to have a good experience). The best self-assessment reports are easy to read and judgmental, not overly descriptive. Although there is no recommended format, some of the best reports are similar in format to inspection reports, with bullet point strengths and weaknesses supported/expanded by a small amount of text. They also tell the reader what is being done to a 'sector' standard, the elusive 'norm'. The worst examples of reports are tabular and very long, what I used to describe as '*never mind the quality, feel the width*'. If the latter is what you have produced, be honest and ask yourself how many people understand it, ever use it, link it to your strategic plan and produce improvement plans based on it? There are a few colleges who wrongly see their self-assessment report as a 'glossy brochure' full of pictures and positives, while ignoring any negative points that if corrected, will improve the provision. This shows a simplistic attitude to being a good or better college that also indicates a lack of challenge from governors. The guidance below answers the most commonly asked questions from providers that I have inspected or supported.

What should be covered in a self-assessment report?

All the work covered by you as a provider, using the questions in the current Common Inspection Framework (CIF) as guidance on what to self-assess (judge yourself on) and grade against. However, grade areas that are particularly important to you, such as your responsiveness (to your LEP, employers, 16-18 year olds, or other groups), equality and diversity or safeguarding (they are important and it helps give you a clear focus on where you are against them and the need to further improve them).

A comprehensive report should:

- ◆ fully reflect the work of you as a provider (imagine that you were sitting down explaining how and what you did to a stranger not familiar with your work, including judgements on how well you do it)
- ◆ be the result of the quality improvement procedures and their findings that you have in place
- ◆ have staff involvement, not just managers (during inspection staff sometimes have no idea of the strengths and weaknesses, the grade proposed for the area they work in or any targets that are included in the report to move provision on – include governors fully, not just 'rubber stamping the final report')
- ◆ include views of 'users' of services such as learners and employers
- ◆ include all sub-contractors (they should have their own report and contribute to yours)
- ◆ use all available data that can tell you about key performance and impact on learners
- ◆ say how you have addressed any weaknesses (AFIs) from your previous inspection report
- ◆ be self-critical and not a just use a SAR as a public relations vehicle (seen too many times)
- ◆ make judgements that can be demonstrated to outsiders, such as inspectors (not just being your view)

- ◆ promote continuous improvement by the SAR being the basis of an overall quality improvement plan
- ◆ be referenced in your strategic plan to show how you are going to assign resources to maintain strengths and move other areas towards becoming strengths, as well as monitoring progress towards meeting new strategic objectives

In the overall introduction to the report it is useful to describe the *process of self-assessment*:

- ◆ who compiled the report, were all staff/learners/employers/subcontractors involved (the elusive 'inclusivity' of the SAR process)?
- ◆ how and when was it produced (annual cycle of QI activities feeding in at predetermined times of the year)? Is this the first, second etc. one that you have produced?
- ◆ anything about self-assessment training or support received?
- ◆ that it follows the CIF comprehensively and covers all the work of the provider
- ◆ any form of moderation of grades/judgements and did it involve external parties?
- ◆ how the results of self-assessment are to be disseminated (summary in newsletters to employers, staff or learners and posters with main points in the college/provider)
- ◆ how it is linked to the production of the QIP and the strategic (three year development) plan?

Producing the report:

- ◆ one of the most effective ways to produce a self-assessment report is to have an annual day where all staff take part in 'brainstorming' to consider strengths and weaknesses of leadership and management overall and within their own occupational areas. Data on retention, achievement and equality as well as evidence from quality assurance needs to be available. Staff brought together from different sites (including subcontractors?)
- ◆ such an approach means that all are involved and feel a part of the SAR process
- ◆ although you need to produce a set of overall judgements for each programme type (16-18 study programmes, apprenticeships, etc.) a system of sub-SARs need to feed up into this for each sector subject area if you really want middle managers to know and improve their areas. In these sub-SARs, it is useful to have some text to explain the scope of an area - staffing, learner numbers according to programmes offered, where and how the programmes within it are delivered (apprenticeships, etc.). *Consider the same information for each second tier area where there is more than one* and have mini self-assessment reports and quality improvement plans for sector subject areas at levels 1 and 2, especially where they are very different [hospitality & hairdressing, child care & uniform public services, for example]
- ◆ in leadership and management it is useful to describe overall staffing and resources such as different delivery sites, subcontractors and an organisational chart (policies and procedures relating to management, governance, equal opportunities, safeguarding and quality improvement should be in supporting inspection ready files along with key SAR evidence)
- ◆ the key judgements of the CIF should be answered [leadership & management including effectiveness of safeguarding; teaching, learning & assessment; personal development, behaviour & welfare and outcomes] - staff need to have been briefed as to what these entail – along with a briefing about the expectations for the different programmes delivered [work experience, English & maths in 16-18 study programmes]. The Ofsted Inspection Handbook is very useful. If there are not strengths or weaknesses under a question it should still include judgements as 'norms' in findings text as they need to be actioned in resultant quality improvement planning if they are ever to become strengths
- ◆ for national organisations, there may be mini 'centre' self-assessment reports that feed into the overall national one – the self-assessment day at each centre might be duplicated with the persons responsible for self-assessment in each centre coming together to produce the national report
- ◆ do not get hung up on wording of strengths and weaknesses, it is more important to be confident that something is a strength first, then worry about the wording second (can it be shown to be above the norm or have a positive effect on the experience of the learner?) – this is where having the right **CRITICAL FRIEND** can benefit as someone with the right experience (LIS!!!) can get these right and save valuable time

- ◆ if high success or retention rates are claimed, compared to what? You may feel it is high because of the additional learning or social needs of your particular learners, rather than because it is simply above a national average
- ◆ use plain English and avoid jargon (**KIS – Keep It Simple** – makes it readable to anyone)
- ◆ use statistical data whenever possible to demonstrate performance and prove key points but not just because you have lots of data and can present it nicely (success rates, progression of learners, equality data, attendance, analysis of questionnaires to learners or employers, grades given internally for observation of training)
- ◆ good teaching, learning and assessment is not proven by you saying you have 95% good or better teaching from the results of your observation process – few providers have really robust processes and their statistics would often indicate TLE as outstanding when inspection shows it clearly is not
- ◆ for learner ‘achievement’ where the development of practical skills are involved, are they what would be expected or are they particularly good? Any exemplars of winning competitions, progression, etc. or obtaining the views of employers as to the quality of practical skills and knowledge being achieved
- ◆ look at inspection reports already published (for your type of college or provider including aspirational outstanding examples – although they are few and Ofsted reports give insufficient detail), especially in the same sector subject areas or a geographical area (urban colleges, for example). Use them to measure yourself and test out ideas on validity of strengths and weaknesses, trends for success rates, etc. Check the Ofsted Chief Inspectors Annual Report for any key messages that are being made by them as although it shouldn’t happen inspections sometimes focus on recent government agendas that were not in the current CIF
- ◆ introductory information can include what is normal but puts what you do in context rather than the blindingly obvious and essential such as meeting the needs of funding or awarding bodies (yawn!!!)

Decisions on grading:

- ◆ the learner is at the heart of the CIF and the work that you do – they should be at the heart of your self-assessment process, with the weighting of strengths and weaknesses being related to their impact on learners. It’s not great buildings and resources but their impact on the learning experience of your learners
- ◆ ‘requires improvement’ (satisfactory) provision often includes many areas that were not considered to be a strength or weakness, they should be covered to show a judgement has been made on them
- ◆ if a grade does not ‘*jump off the page*’ at the completion of a section it may pay to go for the lower of the two grades being considered to be self-critical but with some extra text (‘good with outstanding features’ for example) – the development plan should eventually bring about improvements to push you up to the features part as the academic year goes on
- ◆ if a vocational area is particularly large or complex it may be sensible to have contributory grades, especially if there are major differences between programmes in the same occupational area or if you have apprenticeships and college-based courses. For example in SSA 1 health and social care as opposed to child care and development, in SSA 7 hairdressing as opposed to beauty therapy, in SSA 15 accountancy as opposed to administration, etc. This allows a particularly strong area to be given sufficient credit, and a weaker area to be highlighted for support in the next year in order to make improvements. Although it does not reflect current inspection report structure from a point of view of improvement you need to be fully aware of what is good or better and what needs to be improved. All of this will eventually feed up for your judgements on 16-18 study programmes, apprenticeships, etc.
- ◆ questions to ask when grading: can there be a grade 1 or 2 if retention or achievement is poor? Can there be a grade 3 if there are several strengths and no weaknesses or the weaknesses have little impact on learners? Again, this is where a **CRITICAL FRIEND** can cut through the poor parts of your SAR process and quickly help you get every level of it right

Really getting it really right (the icing on the cake):

- ◆ it is a good idea to have a self-assessment committee with representative staff (and sometimes learners) from different levels to review the proposed report. Where possible include some outside involvement (governors, peer group members, **trusted and suitable critical friends**, employers in

particular areas of learning and employers of learners). A key role is either **confirming proposed grades** or taking part in a **'blind' grading meeting** based on what has been written/presented

- ◆ where there is input from learners or employers by use of questionnaires, it is good practice to feed back to them what has happened (newsletters, posters in colleges or training centres) as a result of their feedback, to demonstrate the value of their feedback in making improvements – *'you said – we did'*

Quality improvement plans (QIPs):

- ◆ these plans should address main weaknesses, improve satisfactory aspects, maintain strengths, consolidate and spread good practice to other areas (strengths)
- ◆ they should have targeted timescales, measurable success criteria and people responsible (by job title in case of staffing changes and to ensure actions are picked up)
- ◆ it is a good idea to review the QIP at regular intervals between self-assessment reports to assess progress – quarterly intervals work particularly well – updating QIPs as things change
- ◆ if the self-assessment report is supported by the QIP, the reviews will act as a continual update to the SA report if it is being looked at by an outside party

What is looked for when evaluating the accuracy and impact of self-assessment reports?

- ◆ how was it produced?
- ◆ who was involved in producing it (inclusivity or individuals in isolation)?
- ◆ are staff, learners, employers (where applicable) and subcontractors aware of it?
- ◆ is it self-critical and robust?
- ◆ is it rich in, and accurate in, its judgements (did inspection findings match the self-assessment report at the last inspection and if not, what were the major differences?)
- ◆ are grading judgements accurate and how do you confidently know (challenge from a critical friend)?
- ◆ does the report cover the requirements of the current CIF?
- ◆ does/will the QIP address issues identified in the self-assessment and main weaknesses in your last inspection report?
- ◆ has/will the QIP plan bring about improvements?
- ◆ is the report linked to your quality improvement procedures and the strategic plan?
- ◆ is self-assessment well established and does it give confidence in your capacity to make improvements?

My recommendations for the best possible self-assessment report:

- ◆ have a two page executive summary to give to staff/governors and to be the focus of your main overall quality improvement activities
- ◆ make the QIP manageable, no more than 8 to 10 main areas ordered by their impact on learners
- ◆ use the services of a top notch critical friend who will help you to get it right and to really focus on what will improve you (the right friend will help you benchmark both strengths and weaknesses)
- ◆ maintain 'position statements' to show in year progress on important weak areas for you such as attendance or maths and English – it will help you to get them right and will inform governors

Extract of an inspection report on a college SAR where Phil acted as a critical friend and the college used a shorter report structure and improvement plan:

The new senior leadership team has a very good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the college. Leaders have demonstrated this in a forthright and concise self-assessment of the college, supported by a well-considered and realistic college improvement plan. They have already taken appropriate actions to tackle weaknesses with rigour and paid careful attention to securing improvement.

The LIS can provide you with support and training for producing **a SAR that will make a difference**