Demonstrating Continual Review: Guidance to awarding bodies on self-assessment

Introduction

When we developed the regulatory principles, our aim was not only to produce a set of quality standards which set out our requirements for regulatory compliance, but to encourage awarding bodies to improve the quality of their products and the standard of service that they offer their stakeholders.

We reviewed a range of quality standards within industry, particularly those that promote continual improvement, and as a result we introduced Regulatory Principle 6 which states that: 'The awarding body must continually review the effectiveness of its services, systems, policies and processes'.

We require that you have systems in place to facilitate continual improvement and that your findings from ongoing review result in an annual self-assessment. We will use your self-assessment as a resource to give us a greater understanding of your current and future objectives and as a tool to help focus our own audit activities.

This guidance has been produced to make our requirements clear, and to outline our expectations of what a self-assessment submission should contain. We recommend that you read this in conjunction with the exemplars on the SQA Accreditation website.
https://accreditation.sqa.org.uk/accreditation/Regulation/Quality_Assurance/Self-assessment

What is self-assessment?

Self-assessment is the process of critically reviewing the quality of an organisation's own performance and provision. It involves a process of self-reflection, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and considering actions or activities that should be undertaken or altered to improve organisational function and quality.

The output of the review must be a self-assessment report and action plan, signed by your accountable officer or another member of staff with the appropriate level of responsibility. The self-assessment must reference actions or activities undertaken in the previous 12 months of a business cycle that have contributed to the improvement of the organisation, demonstrating what steps you have taken to improve business services, systems, policies, and processes. Additionally, the report may feature planned future improvement actions or activities.

The self-assessment must be evidence based but the evidence itself should not be submitted. Awarding bodies must be able to provide evidence if required by SQA Accreditation.

The date for annual submission of an awarding body's self-assessment is to be agreed in conjunction with your allocated regulation manager (RM). Any changes to the submission date, temporary or otherwise, must also be agreed with your allocated RM.

What self-assessment is not

A self-assessment is not a compliance exercise. We measure your compliance through our quality assurance cycle of audits, provider monitoring and risk profiling. Trying to demonstrate that you meet all 18 regulatory principles and regulatory principle directives (RPDs) is not the purpose of the self-assessment.

Similarly, there is no need to reference your compliance documents banked on SharePoint, as we are already aware of them. Statements which say you are compliant with a regulatory principle because you have a policy for that are not valid. The self-assessment review should focus on where improvement actions or activities have been or will be made.

Additionally, there should be no reference to improvement actions or activities identified by SQA Accreditation in either audit or provider monitoring action plans, unless the impact of implementing these plans has necessitated changes that SQA Accreditation are not already aware of.

What should the self-assessment review contain?

The self-assessment submission does not need to address every regulatory principle each year, but only those principles that can be linked to a particular improvement action or activity occurring in that review cycle. It is perfectly acceptable to have gaps where there has been no improvement action or activity. However, for a new awarding body, it is recommended that for their first self-assessment submission, each regulatory principle is addressed for the purposes of understanding and good practice.

You should identify how improvement actions or activities have occurred. For example, they might have been part of a planned activity such as an internal review process. Alternatively, they may have resulted from an unplanned situation, such as legislative changes, customer complaints, or exposure of a system vulnerability.

Other potential examples include:
♦ improvements based on customer feedback
♦ policy and procedural review
♦ IT or website developments
♦ improvements to online systems/e-assessment
♦ improved communication with stakeholders
♦ changes made to enhance quality assurance arrangements
♦ fee reviews
♦ introduction of new qualifications
♦ review of assessment methodologies
♦ improved customer guidance or support material
♦ establishment of new partnerships
♦ security of certificates or online certification

An awarding body should demonstrate consideration of the risk impact of each action or activity involved in making improvements. This should be addressed in the self-assessment alongside any relevant mitigations.

Self-assessment submissions should consider wider improvement actions or activities both across its SQA accredited provision, but also wider business operations that could have an impact on both current and future SQA accredited provision.

Identified improvement actions or activities should be timebound, specifying timescales or KPI's, and have owners assigned to them. This will help SQA Accreditation follow improvement actions and activities from one self-assessment to the next, to establish a continuous improvement cycle.

Awarding body approach to self-assessment

One approach to the annual self-assessment is to have a central log for changes occurring across the organisation over the course of the year so that producing your self-assessment is not a last-minute exercise. If you do not have a formalised system for recording improvement actions and activities, we strongly encourage you to consider implementing one. Awarding bodies that have robust business planning and review system in place will undoubtedly find the self-assessment a much easier process.

Before you submit your self-assessment

We include here some questions that you may want to use as a checklist before you make your submission, to ensure that your self-assessment meets our requirements:

✓ Does it evidence areas where you have implemented improvement actions or activities and include why the action or activity occurred — for example, part of the business planning cycle, as a legislative or regulatory requirement, in response to customer feedback, etc?

✓ Does it contain evidence of review of key business operations over the previous 12 months?

✓ Does it evidence planned or future improvement actions or activities?

✓ Does it highlight risks associated with improvement actions or activities and relevant mitigations?

✓ Does it reference only those regulatory principles and regulatory principles directives that are linked with the improvement actions or activities?

✓ Are the improvement actions or activities time bound and assigned to an owner?

✓ Have previously identified improvement actions and activities been closed out, or addressed in the current self-assessment?

✓ Will there be any problems meeting the agreed submission date?

✗ Remember, your self-assessment is not an exercise to demonstrate compliance with the regulatory principles or a repetition of documents banked on SharePoint. It does not need to cover all 18 regulatory principles and regulatory principle directives if no activity, change or improvement has taken place.

✗ There should be no references to improvement actions or activities highlighted to the awarding body via SQA Accreditation audit or PMV action plans.

Finally, if you are unable to submit your self-assessment by the agreed date or need guidance and support prior to submission, contact your allocated RM and they will be able to offer assistance.