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RESEARCH ON SELF-EVALUATION AS THE BASIS OF A QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globally institutions are changing to seek new frontiers for purposes of either massification or growth or recognition. A part of their motivation is spurred by a need for additional resources, as all countries for different reasons become less capable of providing or subsidising higher education. The loftier motivations lie in serving the socio-economic needs of their countries, handling the rapid globalisation of markets and economies with the envisioned needs higher education feels to prepare a new generation for this inevitability. In the World Bank Report on *Revitalizing Universities in Africa: Strategy and Guidelines* the report argues that African universities should follow certain actions like building "...capacity for teaching and research activities at an international standard in one or more academic areas that are crucial for the country's economic or social advancement" (World Bank 1997:ii).

M.P. Lenn does not only foresee *multiple accreditation*, but also far-reaching prospects of regional and global accreditation, motivated by the trade agreements. These forms of quality assurance provide a system of standards and evaluation applied commonly among institutions or programmes on a regional or global basis. She summarises the future in the following way:

"By the end of the twentieth century, higher education will experience the beginnings of the globalisation of the professions through the multinational adoption of core educational standards. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, national quality assurance systems will have evolved into internationally accepted processes for professional education and practice" (Lenn in Strydom, Lategan & Muller, 1996:8).

In South Africa the National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE) recognises quality as one of the principles in higher education transformation. The pursuit of quality for the NCHE implies maintaining and applying academic and educational standards, both in the sense of minimum expectations and requirements that should be complied with, and in the sense of ideals of excellence that should be striven for.

How these minimum expectations and ideals of excellence are defined, can differ from context to context, partly depending on the specific purposes pursued. Quality is defined in many different ways in education, but in the case of higher education international recognition is also an important normative notion in determining and assessing academic quality and standards.

The application of the principle of quality entails evaluating services and products against set standards, with a view to improvement, renewal or progress. In any system of higher education, a finding of poor quality would be a source of concern and a reason for reform.

In its recommendation the NCHE emphasises the necessity of a developmentally focused quality assurance system. "In establishing a single qualifications framework for higher education as part of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the appropriate registration of all higher education programmes on the NQF will provide an important point of reference for a new quality assurance system for higher education" (NCHE, 1996:72-73).

The issue of the quality of higher education institutions and programmes has become a priority on the South African agenda as a way of also ensuring accountability and value for money. In line with formalised quality assurance systems in many countries, quality assurance in South Africa should promote increased accountability, improve quality and provides student and employer "consumers" with stronger indicators of the value of higher education "products". In some countries formal quality assurance systems have been a precondition for strengthening institutional autonomy. In other countries, quality assurance systems have been introduced in a climate of tough competition for public resources. These reasons for the establishment of a quality assurance system, of course, also apply to South Africa.

While the exact nature of quality assurance systems varies from country to country, some common features can be discerned that will also apply to South Africa. Firstly, most include an initial self-evaluation process followed by an external (typically peer) review and assessment of the processes and results of self-evaluation. Secondly, through self-evaluation and the role of peers in the external evaluation, higher education to a certain extent "owns" the quality system. Thirdly, independent bodies usually co-ordinate the external evaluation which is conducted in terms of more or less standardised processes ranging from detailed criteria to more flexible frameworks. Fourthly, the results of evaluation are made public. Finally, in nearly all countries, negative sanctions linked to state funding can be a consequence of the assessment procedure, but do not often materialise in practice.

In South Africa quality is not only an internal institutional matter any more, but an essential ingredient of an emerging new "evaluative state" relationship between government and higher education in which the former through co-operative governance steers the higher education system through national policies rather than specific interference with detailed state legislation and planning.

In universities, technikons and colleges in South Africa quality assurance mechanisms, procedures and even systems as far as they exist, have varied across the three sectors. Without discussing these quality assurance systems in any details, it is enough to say that they cannot fulfill the expectations of the new national policy documents in the areas of institutional auditing, programme accreditation and quality promotion. The new quality assurance system should be a comprehensive development-orientated system that should serve a single coordinated higher education system aligned to the NQF and South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC)/Council for Higher Education (CHE), professional bodies and private and public sector interests.

The SAQA Act (1995c) provides for the establishment of bodies responsible for the accreditation of providers in offering programmes that meet the standards and qualifications approved by the relevant National Standards Bodies (NSBs) for this NQF. The new quality assurance system should operate in compliance with this framework, and the HEQC of the CHE should be the umbrella body for coordinating quality assurance in higher education. The focus of the HEQC should be on quality assurance at the institutional and programme level, and recognising that separate structures and procedures are required to assess

research quality and productivity. The White Paper on Higher Education Transformation (1997a:22) in South Africa specifies that, to ensure the legitimacy and acceptance of such a system, it must operate in the context of an agreed-upon framework underpinned by:

- “the formulation of criteria and procedures in consultation with higher education institutions
- a formative notion of quality assurance, focused on improvement and development rather than punitive sanction
- a mix of institutional self-evaluation and external independent assessment”.

2. POLICY ANALYSIS BY USING PATTERNS AND TRENDS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES

It is important to critically evaluate this national policy development and formulation at especially the macro- and, to a certain extent, the mesolevel of quality assurance in South African higher education.

Certain primary attributes are recognised in most quality assurance processes (systems). They are the following:

- Purpose(s) of the quality assurance process (system).
- Source or initiator or owner of the quality assurance process (system).
- Framework for judgments.
- Focus of quality assurance process (system).
- Primary procedures in the quality assurance system.
- Direct (budgets) and indirect (human resources) costs of the process.
- Incentives/sanctions in the quality assurance systems.

In Figure 1 these primary attributes and a possible range of behaviour (trends) are mentioned and all these primary attributes can lead to a range of behaviour in quality assurance systems. In the proposed quality assurance processes for South African higher education these attributes and ranges of behaviour can provide valuable perspectives.

Figure 1

2.1 Purposes of the quality assurance processes (system)

In all the quality assurance system policy proposals considered in South African higher education there is agreement about the following kind of objectives (purpose):

- To improve and promote quality in higher education institutions and their programmes.
- To provide assurance to the public regarding the achievement of an acceptable (minimum) level of quality.

In a progress report prepared by this task team for the CHE prepared in November 1998 it dealt with contextual issues and principles and then proposed the following purposes:

Purposes

- Fitness for purpose [to be established through a consideration of system and stakeholder needs, while the goals indicated in the White Paper on Higher Education Transformation (1997a) will provide the framework for debate].
- Value for money.
- Potential for transformation/innovation.

Other activities (purposes authors) of the HEQC would include:

- Engaging in promotional activities to increase quality awareness and strengthen the quality culture in higher education in South Africa.
- Making recommendations to SAQA and national standard-setting bodies and accrediting private higher education institutions.
- Conducting/commissioning research on quality-related issues and tracking comparative developments in other countries.
- Maintaining a database of relevant information and co-ordination with other databases (DoE, SAUVCA, CTP), etc.

In the discussion of possible purpose(s) (objectives) of a quality assurance system for South Africa, it must be emphasised again that these objectives should not only be well and widely accepted by role-players and stakeholders, but they should also consider good and bad practices already existing or tried in South Africa or elsewhere.

In all the policy proposals, the views are that the proposed quality assurance systems should have at least two, simultaneous purposes of improvement and accountability. These purposes can be described in two categories: results can be used to meet demands for public accountability and, at the same time, inform institutional improvement. However, it is well known in many countries that, as accountability pressures have continued to rise, it has been discovered that the principal mechanism that most of them use — detailed, individualised self-evaluation followed by on-site peer review according to general criteria — does not serve both purposes equally well. At the same time, it is realised more and more that the results of self-evaluation must be presented quite differently to different constituencies, for example academics, potential “customers”, and the general public in order to be effective. As a result, performance indicator systems are rapidly evolving at the macrolevels of some governments to supplement institution-centred, peer-based assessment approaches. Professional accreditation organisations, in turn, are considering ways to focus their attention on the relatively narrow issue of publicly assuring acceptable levels of academic programme quality, while continuing to provide advice to institutions about more general areas in which they can improve. All these purposes might lead to the problem of expecting too much too soon from a quality assurance system in a developing country like South Africa.

2.2 Source or initiator (ownership) of the quality assurance system

In the quality assurance systems existing in South Africa up to 1998, only one, the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU), was initiated and owned by the university sector. The other functioning accreditation systems of the professional bodies and the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) are all statutory bodies linked to specific programmes of professions and technikons [Committee of Technikon Principals (CTP)]. The NCHE proposed an HEQC under the jurisdiction of a statutory body called the Higher Education Council (HEC). The White Paper on Higher Education Transformation (1997a) introduces an HEQC

registered with SAQA as Education and Training Quality Assurers (ETQAs), but under the jurisdiction of the statutory CHE. The ETQAs are also part of a statutory body (SAQA) created for the registration and maintenance of standards and qualifications on the NQF. The ETQAs are established by the SAQA in co-operation with National Standard Bodies (NSBs) and providers of education and training, but the ETQAs are not owned by the providers. Professional bodies also have statutory accreditation powers, so South African higher education will have to deal with three different statutory organisations in the quality assurance system if careful policy implementation is not negotiated with these different interest groups.

Many perspectives need to be shared around this primary attribute of ownership. There seems to be general agreement that there is a wide range of circumstances in this regard, not only across higher education institutions, but also across the sectors of higher education in South Africa like universities, technikons and especially different kinds of colleges in South Africa. There are examples where this factor is an accepted part of academic and professional life, but in many programmes, departments, institutions and even sectors such activities in South Africa are almost unknown or have been subdued for different reasons related to government control, unequal funding, little autonomy, almost no accountability, etc.

General agreement insists that substantial culture-inducing efforts of ownership must be made before any, some, or good progress concerning quality assurance can be made. In line with the above, it also needs to be pointed out that many discussions and practical examples of quality assurance processes readily indicate correlation between the knowledge and attitudes of leaders about the quality assurance system and the level of perceived success after self-evaluation cycles. What is also important, however, is for the level of power (where it is located in the system: institutions versus faculties versus government) to be accommodated in the design of the quality assurance system. How one proceeds and what the nature of implemented results will be, depend strongly on this set of related aspects.

The presence and participation of professional bodies in quality assurance systems are also very important in ownership discussions for different reasons. These professional bodies formulate standards for education programmes in their fields and often, with or through government sanction, they control access to professional practice. In other professional areas programme accreditation does not exist and the universities, for instance, in effect offer graduates the license to practise. The presence or absence of such influences is a powerful factor in the ownership of a quality assurance system. If the accreditation processes of professional bodies are relatively non-prescriptive, adaptable and useful — as in most cases in South Africa — a powerful tool is gained for self-evaluation efforts of higher education institutions. If “professionals” in a certain field do not expect accreditation, the design of a quality assurance system must emphasise self-evaluation and external evaluation in a co-operative way to promote ownership.

Co-operation among higher education institutions and with other role-players/stakeholders bearing the interests, the stages of experience and the development of all in mind, is not well developed at all in South Africa. From discussions with interest groups it seems as if the higher education system consisting of universities, technikons and colleges will find it difficult to speak with one voice on quality assurance. This is especially important in relation to the NQF and the SAQA where so much work still needs to be done in connection with the registration of standards and qualifications before the accreditation of providers can be implemented.

These and other factors such as economic globalisation, technological expansion and different ideological views of knowledge also influence the ownership of a quality assurance system. It is not possible to take into account all these factors all the time in designing a quality assurance system in co-operation with all possible role-players and stakeholders. Hard choices must be made in connection with the initiation and the ownership of the quality assurance system and how this quality assurance system must be phased into a fairly chaotic higher education system full of uncertainties and well aware of the fact that future needs will change as the quality assurance system and higher education develop as a part of a broader education and training system in South Africa.

Looking at the pattern of source or initiator (ownership) in our policy analysis of quality assurance systems in South Africa, it seems as if there is uncertainty on how far government or institutions or statutory bodies or even professional bodies should dominate the quality assurance system. Emphasis is often placed on collaborative quality assurance schemes through different kinds of collaborative agencies, but do they work in practice?

Due to space limitations all the other attributes cannot be analysed, but at least a discussion of the attribute of primary procedures is important for this paper.

2.3 Primary procedures (mechanisms) in a quality assurance system

In all the different national policy proposals where procedures are specified, there is strong emphasis on self-evaluation and external or independent review or assessment as primary procedures for a balanced quality assurance system. In explaining these two procedures in the policy proposals, there is also always emphasis on the necessity of improvement and promotion as well as accountability in the quality assurance system.

In the national policy proposals there are different emphases on self-evaluation and external/independent review or assessment. The NCHE talks about two functions: institutional auditing with the mechanisms of institutional self-evaluation and independent review processes and programme accreditation also through a combination of programme self-evaluation and independent assessment. Quality promotion should be developed at national and institutional levels. The idea was to use SERTEC and the QPU to provide expertise and infrastructure for the two quality assurance functions propagated by the NCHE. This was seen as a way to use existing expertise and experience well. These procedures are emphasised without any emphasis on comparisons and ratings of institutions and programmes through statistical indicators.

SERTEC in its policies talks about self-evaluation as a qualitative analysis of the effectiveness, standards and educational resources of a programme or unit within a technikon. It is important to note that this self-evaluation process is prescribed by SERTEC, because it is felt as necessary as the various technikons are at different stages of development in respect of quality management and the development of internal self-evaluation processes. At some technikons self-evaluation is done only on an *ad hoc* basis, while at others a solid foundation has already been laid for ongoing internal quality assurance procedures. SERTEC has indicated that only once self-evaluation has been firmly established at all technikons, will it be possible to reconsider the procedures currently used for site visits.

In the Green Paper on Higher Education (1996) and the White Paper on Higher Education Transformation (1997a) a mix of institutional self-evaluation and external independent assessment is also seen as important.

The concerns of too heavy reliance on peer review in self-evaluation and even external reviews in many systems are twofold: uneven application of standards by the peer reviewers involved and inadequate involvement of appropriate “stakeholders” drawn from outside the academic world in the process. The first of these is mainly a result of inadequate training; a condition now being more fully addressed by most quality assurance systems. The second is more problematic and in most cases requires the development of additional quality assurance mechanisms to supplement peer review. These include greater use of institutional performance statistics and ratings of institutions by “third parties”. While self-evaluation and peer review conducted by academics will always remain the most critical part of quality assurance, there is a growing conviction that the process must also involve the broader interests of society. At the same time, it must find ways to supplement the broad qualitative judgments made by peer reviewers with common statistical “benchmarking” information that is publicly credible and that allows such judgments to be put in an understandable context. These considerations should also be carefully built into the policy implementation of the quality assurance system in South Africa.

With at least some basic policy analyses on certain attributes more directly related to the topic done, it is now important to provide perspectives on self-evaluation in the national policy formulation and implementation.

3. THE SELF-EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

According to national policies on a South African quality assurance system, the system will function at the institutional and programme level.

There is fortunately no indication that the policies will prescribe the format, structure or style of any higher education institution’s self-evaluation processes and its self-evaluation report in a detailed way. However, a well-known type of framework, as seen in Figure 2, can be of assistance in the policy implementation.

Figure 2

The institution’s self-evaluation report should first and foremost be seen as a self-critical analysis and evaluation of performance at a given time. As Thune (1998:11) puts it:

“The self-evaluation is the standard against which the institution can measure itself. It provides a framework for building up a definition of quality, it helps the institution decide how far it is achieving its strategic mission and goals, and it allows it to build an action plan for development”.

It must:

- be based on substantiating information derived from the institution’s internal self-evaluation; and
- lead to the identification of action to be taken for the following year.

The self-evaluation report should therefore be seen as part of the institution’s normal planning cycle. The inner circle of Figure 3 explains the process.

Figure 3

This cycle, preferably done annually, is embedded in a larger cycle of strategic planning based on the vision of the institution and its intended mission statement. The outer cycle interacts with the inner cycle in at least two ways:

- The annual operational plan is informed by the longer-term strategic plan of three years.
- The vision and mission statement and the strategic plan will help determine the quality policy to be adopted by the institution. This entails quality mechanisms, procedures, strategies, criteria and standards, targets, performance indicators, etc. to be used to inform its self-evaluation processes.

Since the institution does not exist in a vacuum and frequently has to interact with a number of external bodies, it is essential that the process developed for the self-evaluation reporting is able to meet the requirements of these external bodies. The planning cycle identified in the figure is not static, and each annual cycle should be seen as taking the institution nearer to its mission. This way, self-evaluation reporting forms part of a series of annual cycles, the purpose of which is the continuous improvement of the quality of teaching/learning, research and community service undertaken in order for the institution's mission to be achieved.

Critical self-evaluation should be an activity that all institutions should regard as a matter of course. Self-evaluation reports with the summarised conclusions have uses far more valuable to the institution than the mere provision of a context for external auditing and assessment by external bodies or agencies.

This framework and diagram might be valuable to institutions to review all or part of their quality assurance systems and to confirm that internal arrangements reflect good practice elsewhere in the sector. The guidelines are in no way intended to be prescriptive and an institution may find that its methods of assuring quality are more extensive than those suggested here. Certain aspects applicable to institutions can therefore appear to be over- or underemphasised.

Interaction between institutions should be encouraged - reading, understanding and sharing ideas will assist in the improvement of existing mechanisms and procedures of self-evaluation.

4. THE CYCLIC SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS AT INSTITUTIONAL AND PROGRAMME LEVELS

As already mentioned, the quality assurance in higher education in South Africa will be undertaken at the institutional level and at the programme level in the first phase of quality assurance and this should also be reflected in the self-evaluation.

This ideal process should be cyclic and be repeated after a predetermined lapse of time, depending on the requirements. Self-evaluation for internal purpose is ideally undertaken on an annual basis and external reviews on a three- to five-year cycle. This cyclic process also applies to self-assessment programmes and external assessments by an independent review panel.

The main steps in the self-evaluation process, as depicted in figure 4, are:

- The institution formulates its mission statement and in line with this its goals/aims and objectives in the light of its notion of quality and the role it sees for itself *vis-à-vis* its students, the employers of its graduates, national policy, regional needs, the community in which it functions and also in the light of universal demands put on it by the growth in knowledge and by the very nature of being an academic institution with recognised standards.
- The institution is evaluated by itself or by an external body as regards the extent to which it attains its goals and objectives.

Figure 4

To be effective the self-evaluation process should not be a once-off exercise undertaken before the external evaluation envisaged in the national policies and then forgotten for a number of years until the cycle repeats itself. The institutions should have a nucleus of staff members who will on a continuous basis work on quality improvement based on self- and external evaluation within the institution. Part of their task is to create an awareness of quality being every person's responsibility in the institution. Before the external evaluation the quality officer and his/her staff will focus on the self-evaluation process leading up to the final drafting of the self-evaluation report. After the review the institution should occupy itself by acting on the insights gained and the recommendations of the review panel to effect quality improvement in the institution and its programmes. Van Vught and Westerheijden (1995:2) explain the effect of continuous self-evaluation on an institution as follows:

"To prepare the university for the audit, it needs to investigate its ways of 'handling' quality in its strategic management processes. In other words, a brief, analytical self-evaluation has to be written... A good self-evaluation makes clear what role quality plays within the university and how quality is cared for. This can be very helpful in the development of the university as an institution".

The two distinct phases of self-evaluation and of review should, however, only be a part of a larger whole, i.e. the continuous process of cultivating and fostering a culture of quality in the institution at all levels.

The self-evaluation processes should be undertaken with great care. In the strategies on revitalising universities in Africa the following steps in connection with quality and relevance are mentioned:

"Universities, either individually or collectively, can periodically monitor and assess the quality of their teaching and research. Institutional self-evaluations, peer reviews by sister institutions, and university-managed accreditation systems have most commonly been used by the university community as self-managed mechanisms for quality control. This is an area in which donor support (via access to training and comparative experience) may be particularly effective" (World Bank 1997:12).

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS ON RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT WORK

In a developing country like South Africa, where our higher education system is going through a radical period of change (transformation), it is important to realise that applied research in our context is desperately needed, but development work building capacity is just as essential from the point of view of progress, improvement, accountability, competitiveness, etc.

The broad vision and mission of this national Unit for Research into Higher Education (URHE) over a decade have always been to promote and advance higher education as a field of study in South Africa. With this vision in mind, the mission of the URHE is to contribute to critical thinking and scientifically investigate key areas of higher education, not only to advance higher education as a field of study, but also to contribute to the development of South African higher education. Currently the Unit is studying quality assurance in higher education in South Africa, taking into account the challenges to establish an equitable, accessible, democratic, effective and efficient higher education system.

In our main research project the URHE is now entering the third year of the present research cycle of four years (1 April 1997 — 31 March 2001) in which it is engaged in a research project entitled *The impact, influence and implications of quality assurance at macro-, meso- and microlevels of the university system in South Africa*. The focus in this research project is on self-evaluation as the basis of any quality assurance system. The research hypothesis reads as follows: Self-evaluation is a necessary precondition for any system of quality assurance in higher education. The basic rationale of this research project is that the most important purpose of a quality assurance system should be the promotion of self-evaluation in institutions, taking into account national policy, the requirements of the new HEQC, cost-effectiveness of quality assurance and external and internal factors and influences impacting on the quality of higher education institutions.

After a first cycle of quality assurance by the HEQC, the URHE would again like to research progress that might have been made with self-evaluation in higher education institutions in South Africa so that clarity might be gained on the impact, influence and implications of the HEQC quality assurance system on self-evaluation at higher education institutions.

In addition to its research task, the URHE sees capacity-building and development work within the Southern African higher education sector on quality assurance and related themes as a most important endeavour. For this purpose links have been established regionally, nationally and internationally, and the Unit also regularly organises and presents workshops, seminars and conferences for higher and further education practitioners, policy-makers, managers, researchers and post-graduate students in the broad region.

In addition to numerous research reports, journal articles and conference papers, the Unit has also recently published three books on quality assurance internationally and in South Africa and will this year launch a new publication series, hopefully of direct practical value for quality assurance practitioners in South African higher education institutions.

The Unit is supported by an Academic Information Service for Higher Education which provides a service for higher education scholars and student at a national and an international level.

Hopefully this approach to higher education research and development work in a developing country like South Africa will finally contribute to answering serious questions of whether the theory and policy formulation for quality assurance, quality assurance policy implementation and practices and the rhetoric of quality assurance expectations are in line with one another because the luxury of window-dressing or expensive mistakes just cannot be afforded, especially in developing countries. The work should contribute to our ideal of an African Renaissance.

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Figure 1: Patterns and trends (range of behaviour)

Deciding the purpose of the self-evaluation processes and report
(setting targets for organisational development)

x

Identifying the areas and standards to be audited/assessed

x

Identify the parts of the institution which will be involved

x

Involving and enabling staff

(communicating the purpose and procedures of self-evaluation, assigning responsibilities, providing time, meeting staff training needs)

x

Gathering information

(deciding what information is needed and obtaining relevant data)

x

Making decisions

(collating findings, analysing, recording findings and action points)

x

Reporting

(compiling the report)

x

Evaluating the process

Figure 2: A type of self-evaluation framework

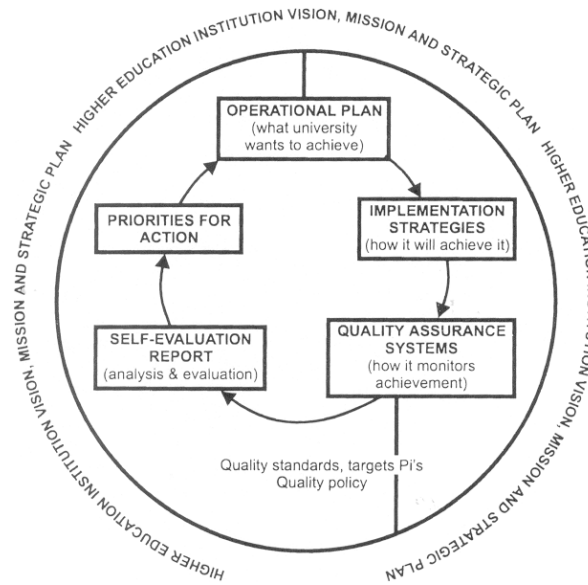


Figure 3: Strategic planning and self-evaluation

Figure 4: Self-evaluation cycle

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