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A Framework for Conducting Assessments of IDRC-Funded Research Institutions

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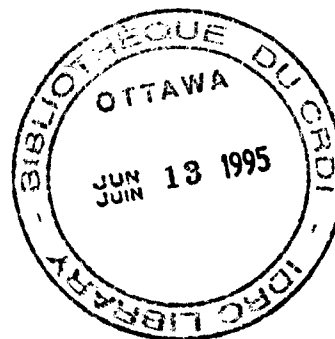
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A Framework for Conducting Assessments of IDRC-Funded Research Institutions

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose

IDRC seeks to build the capacity of Southern partner institutions to generate high quality research in line with their unique missions. To be able to make funding decisions that will target the Centre's resources to areas of greatest need, IDRC requires comprehensive information about the institutions it funds.

This publication outlines a framework for IDRC personnel to use when planning institutional assessments geared to generate such data. It considers four dimensions common to all research institutions:

- **key forces in the environment** that have a bearing on the institution;
- **institutional motivation** — the mission, goals and culture, and incentives that drive performance from within;
- **organizational capacity** —the underlying forces that support institutional performance, including systems of strategic leadership, human resources, other core resources, program management, process management, and inter-institutional linkages;
- **organizational performance** — the extent to which the organization reaches its mission (effectiveness), provides good value for the resources invested (efficiency), and meets the needs of stakeholders over time (relevance).

Each of these dimensions is outlined over the following pages, and key areas for review are suggested within each. It is hoped that the common vocabulary and approach suggested in this framework will enable IDRC to carry out institutional assessments that capture the uniqueness of each partner institution.

**Framework for Assessing
Research Institutions**

- Understand the organization's environment
- Determine institutional motivation
- Probe key areas of institutional capacity
- Measure institutional performance

1.2 Some Important Considerations

- For institutional assessments to be mutually beneficial learning exercises, both IDRC and its partner should work together throughout the assessment process.
- Evaluations are, by definition, institution-specific; each assessment process must be customized to fit the organization, with its own significant internal and external forces.
- Because each institution is unique, the precise issues that bear on institutional functioning cannot be fully known ahead of time. Thus, it is not appropriate to have a detailed blueprint (i.e. no pre-determined instrumentation) for conducting an institutional assessment.
- Choices of issues to consider and data to collect must match the limitations of the evaluators' resources and interests.

1.3 Constructing the Assessment Process

The Workplan

The workplan is a document detailing how the institutional assessment will be carried out. It is a formal statement in which specific areas of inquiry are identified, methodologies settled upon, and values clarified. Thus, the workplan becomes an important agreement which helps make and keep the process transparent.

Factors to be negotiated include the specific types of data to be collected and, in particular, fair and legitimate performance indicators. Without the latter, the assessment process will have little credibility or positive potential for reform. Value judgments will ultimately need to be imposed upon the performance indicators chosen, and these, too, will need to be negotiated.

Data Collection and Analysis

Approaches to data collection and analysis must be tailored to each institution, based upon the available data and the evaluation budget. Data sources can be internal (drawing on existing management and administrative practices) as well as external to the institution. For thorough understanding, use of both quantitative and qualitative data is recommended.

Quantitative data are vital and take many forms, ranging from counts and other descriptive statistics to ratio variables such as measures of unit cost or productivity.

All such data should conform to the best available standards of reliability and validity.

Qualitative data represent diverse sources and methods of data collection. They may include observational records of the research setting, data from interviews and group discussions, and written data ranging from letters of clients to formal questionnaires and inventories on organizational culture. These forms of data can be gleaned from experiences and people inside the institution as well as from peers and clients external to it.

By weaving qualitative with quantitative information, a deeper understanding of the institution can be achieved.

One of the most difficult aspects of an evaluation is determining whether the data reveal good or weak performance and capacity. Indeed, multiple interpretations could arise from the same data, depending on the outlook of those evaluating the information. Judgments about data are generally made through four decision-making tools:

- norm referencing or benchmarking (using real-world norms with which to compare data)
- reliance on the judgments of evaluators and/or peers
- criterion referencing (deviation from specific, stated goals and objectives)
- measurement of differences among groups (often with the use of tests of statistical significance)

The research institution itself must decide what levels of performance are acceptable in its environment. Donors must ultimately decide whether or not these levels of performance (or potential performance) are worth investing in, as well as the plausible connections between capacity and performance.

1.4 Costs: Expectations and Limitations

The expense of an institutional assessment is a major issue. Collecting valid evaluation data is a comprehensive process that can be difficult, time-consuming, and costly. Without such data, institutions must rely on the perceptions of experts, and the credibility of external people can become a focal issue. Evaluations are easily criticized when based on opinion rather than data.

When trade-off decisions need to be made in order to keep within budget, these must be explained if they materially effect the validity or reliability of the data. Expectations need to match the scope of the exercise; thus limitations should be clearly identified.

1.5 Feedback

After the assessment, it is essential to share the results of the exercise with those in the organization (and possibly to interested stakeholders outside the organization). Effective strategies for giving feedback include written reports, presentations, formal and informal talks, and combinations of methods. It is ultimately the research institution's responsibility to accept or reject the analysis and judgments of evaluators and it is the institution which must decide whether and how to act on results (i.e. make organizational change).

2.0 UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANIZATION'S ENVIRONMENT

The research institution's setting within a particular country or region provides multiple contexts that influence how the institution operates and what it produces. It is important to understand the major external forces that are helping to shape the organization's evolution and that influence its functioning. **The critical element to capture in an assessment is the impact of these environmental forces on the mission, performance, and capacity of the institution.**

The major environmental forces that influence research organizations are depicted in the following table:

Environment	Some Specific Forces	Areas for Review
Administrative/legal	Classification (international, governmental, or non-governmental) and all policy, legislative, regulatory, legal frameworks that affect the activities of the organization.	The legal or regulatory context that gives rise to the institution, including specific laws and regulations that support/inhibit development.
Political	Impact of all levels of government on the institution; access to government resources.	The extent to which government and its bureaucracy contributes resources to the institution; whether the political system is stable or poised to undergo significant change; whether the political context of the institution directly involves the legal context.
Economic	Effects of GDP, community economics, IMF conditionality, wage/price structure, and inflation on institutional functioning.	Aspects of the economic system that directly impact the work of the research institution.
Social/cultural	Norms, values, attitudes in society, literacy.	Forces at local, national, and regional levels with profound influence on the way the research institution conducts its work and on what outcomes and effects are valued.
Technological	Local infrastructure, technological literacy, information technology, link to national issues.	The types and the level of relevant technology in the society; the process by which new technology comes into use, including the level of difficulty in acquiring needed research technologies.

Environment	Some Specific Forces	Areas for Review
Clients/ stakeholders	Clients, beneficiaries, volunteers, donors; their relationship to the organization.	The needs and expectations of key stakeholders external to the organization, i.e. those people and organizations directly concerned with the research institution's work.
Other organizations	Relationships/linkages with similar institutions (competitors or partners) and organizations.	Formal and <i>de facto</i> relationships with universities, government departments and agencies, and other research institutions (foreign and domestic) that influence the research institution's work.

3.0 DETERMINING INSTITUTIONAL MOTIVATION

3.1 Introduction

No two research institutions are alike. Each has a distinct **history**, purpose, and **mission**. Each has a unique working ambience or **culture** that is an amalgam of its purpose, values, and personality. Each institution has **incentives** through which research creativity and productivity are motivated. All of these internal institutional forces are powerful motivators of behaviour.

3.2 History

An organization's history is charted in its important milestones — the story of its inception, its rate of growth, awards of achievement or distinction, and notable changes in structure or leadership. The history of an organization is often an unwritten collection of important stories or legends that can be highly motivational to members. For instance, accounts of the organization's triumphs and achievements and memories of important obstacles overcome are often woven into a proud tradition to uphold.

3.3 Mission

A research institution's mission is its *raison d'etre*. It speaks to the questions: Why does the organization exist? Whom does it serve? By what means does it serve them?

The **mission statement** is the written expression of the basic goals, characteristics, values, and philosophy that shape the organization and give it purpose. It generally articulates the scope of activities, products/services and clients, and the significant technologies and approaches that are used to meet goals.

By expressing the organization's ultimate aims, the mission statement provides members with a sense of shared purpose and direction and communicates this purpose to external stakeholders as well. Long-term goals enshrined within the mission statement inspire the strategic planning of major activities. These goals can also form a basis for evaluating organizational performance.

The actual driving force of institutional behaviour is the **perceived mission** — that is, the understanding of the mission on the part of staff. One task of an organizational assessment is to assess the degree to which the formal mission statement is understood and has been internalized by members of the organization (i.e. the congruence of perceived and stated missions).

3.4 Culture

Culture refers to the sum total of the values, beliefs, customs, traditions, and meanings related to mission fulfilment that have developed over the life of an organization. While the mission statement formally articulates organizational purpose, it is the organization's culture that gives life to the mission and helps make its realization possible.

Culture reflects the institution's history and governs its character. It embodies the organization's collective symbols, myths, visions, and heroes. It frames the boundaries of acceptable attitudes and behaviour and creates a shared ethos.

Cultural values express what people believe the organization wants to happen.

Cultural values play a central role in performance, for in defining the lengths to which members of the organization are expected to go to fulfil tasks, the culture causes individuals to use or to push the limits of institutional capacity. An institution whose members passionately strive to improve their work has a higher probability of achieving its goals than one without such committed individuals.

Research institutions generally work to achieve a "culture of knowledge" characterized by a climate of learning, a sense of belonging, ownership for work done, and an acceptance of delayed rewards.

3.5 Incentives

The research endeavour requires intense dedication on the part of researchers, for it entails long-term results, uncertainty, and a dearth of immediate products. Indeed, one of the major challenges of a research institution is keeping its research staff motivated in the face of delayed gratification. Institutional incentives refer to an organization's system of rewards (and punishments) which serve to promote scientific creativity and productivity. These include peer recognition, intellectual freedom and stimulation, adequate remuneration, and prestige.

Institutional Motivation

Components	Key Areas For Review
History	<p>The evolution of the institution as expressed through formal documents such as the charter, stated goals and objectives, and plans (strategic or otherwise).</p> <p>Important organizational milestones that help elucidate the mission and profile the research institution's developmental progress.</p>
Mission	<p>The formal mission statement; the awareness of organizational members of the mission and extent to which they subscribe to it; evidence of updating the mission/goals; linkage of the mission to organizational goals.</p>
Culture	<p>Values and beliefs that drive organization members to fulfil institutional goals; compatibility of these values with IDRC's values. A "culture of knowledge" characterized by a climate of learning, a sense of belonging, ownership for work done, and an acceptance of delayed rewards.</p>
Incentives	<p>Key factors, values, and motives that motivate the development of scientific creativity and productivity of individuals and of the institution as a whole: an atmosphere that avoids isolation and domination, provides stimulation, and permits autonomy of action; the social value placed on scientific knowledge; the importance of peer recognition; adequate remuneration; opportunity for advancement.</p>

4.0 INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

4.1 Introduction

For over 20 years, IDRC has stressed that investment choices should focus on building the capacity of indigenous organizations and institutions to solve their development problems. The Centre's recently defined strategy for the 1990s, *Approaches to Strengthening the Institution*, calls for a focused and holistic effort to build the capacity of its funded partners to ensure institutional development.

The experience of IDRC and other agencies indicates that creating wider change at the organizational level is conceptually and practically a more difficult and complex undertaking than is project support. At the centre of this complexity is our embryonic understanding of institutions and of building organizational capacity.

Our framework for viewing organizational capacity entails six interrelated areas that underlie an institution's performance: strategic leadership, human resources, other core resources, program management, process management, and inter-institutional linkages. Each of these areas contains various components, as detailed in the table below:

Components of Capacity

Strategic Leadership:	Leadership, Strategic Planning, Governance, Structure, Niche Management
Human Resources:	Research staff, technical/support staff
Other Core Resources:	Infrastructure, Technology, Finance
Program Management:	Planning, Implementing, Monitoring
Process Management:	Planning, Problem-solving, Decision-making, Communications, Monitoring and Evaluation
Inter-Institutional Linkages:	Networks, Partnerships, External Communications

4.2 Strategic Leadership

Strategy refers to all those activities that set the course for the organization and aim to keep it on course, in service of its mission. Strategic leadership is a process of directing the efforts of the organization's internal members and external stakeholders towards organizational objectives.

Strategic leadership is associated with vision, creativity, and risk-taking. It encompasses all the various ways and means used by the organization to inspire members to perform, at the same time that the institution is attempting to adapt to or buffer external forces. Setting strategy implies creating and implementing a support system, both within and outside the organization, aimed at furthering its mission.

Strategic Leadership

Components	Key Areas for Review
Leadership	Managing culture, setting direction, providing symbols of mission, ensuring tasks are done, supporting resource development
Strategic Planning	Scan of environment; clear/understood mission, goals, objectives; reasonable tactics to get to goals; clarity; adaptability
Governance	Legal framework adhered to, good process for strategic decisions, who governs, methods for setting direction, links to external world
Structure	Roles and responsibilities, coordinating systems, the way work is grouped, authority systems
Niche Management	Area of expertise, uniqueness, recognition of uniqueness

4.3 Human Resources

The human resources (HR) of an organization consist of all individuals engaged in any of the organization's activities, regardless of roles. It is well-recognized that the human resources are the most valuable asset of any organization. This is particularly true of research centres, where those carrying out core functions are highly trained individuals. IDRC has a history of commitment to supporting the continuing development of the professional skills and expertise of researchers in its partner institutions.

The HR management function is charged with planning and controlling this resource to make sure that people's needs are met in a way that maximizes performance. It is highly likely that staff who are reasonably comfortable with working conditions and stimulated by the environment will be productive.

Managing the human resource function entails a range of activities including forecasting staff demand, recruiting and hiring the best people, keeping personnel records, creating an evaluation system, and providing for professional development.

Human Resources

Components	Key Areas for Review
Research staff	Systems/processes for recruiting and hiring, training, record-keeping, compensation, monitoring and evaluation, and staff development
Technical/support staff	

4.4 Other Core Resources

We have grouped the other core institutional resources into three areas: infrastructure, technology, and finance. These resource areas must be institutionally managed, as they require systems for their planning, control, and proper use.

Throughout the development literature, studies point to deficiencies in internal management capabilities. Stories abound regarding poor resource management — equipment remaining in crates and getting ruined before it is used; buildings falling into disrepair because there are no maintenance systems; health programs shut down because there are no skilled staff members. It is clear that the capacity to manage resources is crucial not only to performance but also to institutional survival.

Core Resources

Components	Key Areas for Review
Infrastructure	Facilities, equipment, maintenance systems, utilities.
Technology	Levels of technology needed/acquired to perform work.
Finance	Planning, managing and monitoring, cash and budget; ensuring an accountable and auditable financial system.

4.5 Program Management

Program management is the ability to develop and manage all of the organization's research, training, and service programs in a way that supports the mission. Program management is vitally connected to all other areas of organizational capacity, for ultimately the strength of the capacities of strategic leadership, core resource management, process management, and intra-institutional linkages affects the quality of the institution's programs. The results of program performance are highly visible outside the organization and are often the major focus of institutional evaluations.

Good management sees to it that proper weight is given to each facet of mission fulfilment. For instance, if producing research and conducting ongoing training are both stated priorities, each should receive commensurate resources.

Program Management

Components	Key Areas for Review
Planning	Identifying needs, looking at alternatives, setting objectives and priorities, costing activities and developing evaluation systems.
Implementing	The quality of program functioning: schedules adhered to, activities conducted and coordinated appropriately, past experience utilized.
Monitoring	Adequate systems for evaluating progress and communicating feedback to all stakeholders.

4.6 Process Management

Taking a vision and making it a reality through smooth-flowing, daily work in an organization is largely dependent on the organization's ongoing "processes." These are the internal management systems, the many mechanisms that guide interactions among people to ensure that ongoing work is accomplished rather than hindered or blocked. These include planning, communication, decision-making, problem-solving, monitoring, and evaluation. Process management makes things happen in an organization.

Every piece of work in an organization goes through these systems; people interact to accomplish the work, and the way the organizational processes are set up dictates the tone of the interaction that takes place. Plans set directions, as do policies and procedures. Problem-solving, decision-making, and communication are all ways in which the people in the research institution create the flows of information that make things happen. If these processes are working, the outcome is that the organization is learning and accomplishing a great deal, and ideally, also learning as it moves along.

Process management takes place at every level of an organization. Boards of governors must know how to plan, problem-solve, and make timely decisions. If they are deficient in these areas, organizational performance is often hampered. These same processes are at work all the way down the organizational hierarchy, albeit at more operational levels. For instance, project units and departments need to be able to set direction and create mechanisms to carry out activities in service of this direction.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES

- Planning
- Problem-solving
- Decision-making
- Communications
- Monitoring and Evaluation

4.7 Inter-Institutional Linkages

For organizations engaged in creating and utilizing knowledge, it is vital to cultivate contacts with other institutions, organizations, and groups of strategic importance to the work. These may be potential collaborators and collegial bodies, potential funders, or key constituents. Formal links with others through networks and partnerships can result in a healthy exchange of approaches and resources (including knowledge and expertise) and can serve as an important reality check.

Networks

Information networks are groups of individuals or organizations that share a common interest and exchange information in various forms on a regular or organized basis. IDRC considers networks indispensable to the efficient pursuit of scientific research and technological adaptation for development and indeed, has initiated and broadly supported many in order to reduce the isolation of Southern researchers, promote the sharing of information, technologies, and research methodologies, and promote research collaborations.

Computerized information networks, in particular, have become valuable facilitators of communication among investigators, enabling them to share data and experiences on-line. Indeed, in certain fields, participating in these networks is essential to keep up with fast-breaking developments; both participation and maintenance require a steady commitment of resources.

IDRC supports four types of networks:

- horizontal networks linking institutions with similar interests working in the same general field of research
- vertical networks of institutions working interdependently on different aspects of the same problem or on different problems associated with the same theme
- information networks providing centralized information management services to members and users, enabling them to contribute and share information as needed
- training networks providing training and supervisory services to participants working independently in their own research areas

The Centre has observed that networks evolve along a developmental curve, becoming more highly integrated, in terms of interactions and collaborations, as they mature.

Partnerships

Over the past decade, new alliances or partnerships have formed in both the developing and developed world through which organizations share resources to achieve common goals and objectives. Partnerships can occur between funders and research institutions, for example, support by Northern NGOs for particular agendas advanced by Southern research institutions. Or partnerships can occur between two similar institutions, as in linkage arrangements between Northern and Southern institutions. Partnerships can also occur with a research institution and its local stakeholder groups, as frequently seen in health and agricultural research centres.

External Communications

Formal and informal communications with key external players and constituents are vital to help foster important linkages. A continuous flow of information to the outside world about the research institution and its work keeps those in the wider environment informed, be they the taxpaying public, identified constituents, or specialized technical audiences. External communications can take a variety of forms. Besides journal articles, proven ways of communicating the organization's work to the wider public are newsletters and promotional materials crafted to create awareness and interest in the organization's work. Research reports and annual reports of activities serve to raise the organization's profile and, by keeping important stakeholders informed, can play an important role in linking the organization to the wider community.

Inter-Institutional Linkages

Mechanisms	Key Areas for Review
Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Number, type, adequacy of technology, utility- Identification and recruitment of appropriate members- Efficient coordination; participatory governance; strong management structure- Adequate donor support- Participation of national research systems
Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Formal vs informal- Number, type- Utilization- Cost-benefit
External communications	Type, frequency, needs met

5.0 MEASURING INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE

5.1 Introduction

A research institution's performance falls within three broad areas:

- performance in activities that support the mission (effectiveness)
- performance in relation to the resources available (efficiency)
- performance in relation to long term viability and sustainability (relevance)

Specifically, the quantity and quality of research produced by the institution is fundamental to the achievement of mission. Moreover, the organization must be able to meet its goals with an acceptable outlay of resources. Finally, the sustainability of the research institution over the long term is a vital issue, particularly to donors and granting agencies.

5.2 Movement Towards Mission

The assessment process must address how well the organization is fulfilling its mission. Programs and activities generated by the institution in pursuit of its mission are the most discernible aspects of institutional performance. IDRC must assess the quantity and quality of these tangible outputs. It can be a daunting task, however, to determine the particular performance indicators to use and what level of achievement within each indicates "good performance."

Organizational goals and priorities provide the starting point for performance measurement:

- What does the research institution value? How does it define and measure its performance?
- Do these criteria mesh with IDRC's?

Considerations when evaluating research output:

- Regarding **quantity** of research output, absolute numbers or measures should be tempered by considerations of quality (of the journal, of the applied work) and the importance and impact of the articles or work within the field.
- Regarding the **quality** of research output, peer review is internationally considered the most basic indicator, but experts within any field can easily identify the most prestigious and influential journals. Of course, modern information technology makes citation indices a highly useable and valid measure of the influence of a particular researcher.

Typical Performance Indicators In Research Institutions

Effectiveness

- number of publications accepted by refereed journals
 - number of citations (considered the best indication of the work's influence in its field or related fields)
 - number of patents and other intellectual property
 - software developed
 - collaborative links with other researchers
 - external funds/contracts received
 - number of people served (for action research)
 - health, educational benefits
 - peer ratings of relevance of research
 - conferences attended in which papers/posters were presented
 - client satisfaction
 - social/economic effects (as per mandate)
 - relevance of work to national development
 - relevance of work to field
 - relevance of services to users
 - number of students supervised
 - number of trainee researchers supervised
 - origin of students and trainees (country, institution)
 - links with higher education institutions
 - number of publications in which students are co-authors
 - students'/trainees' assessments of training environment
-

5.3 Efficient Use of Resources

In today's economy, research institutions must not only provide exceptional research and teaching services, they must provide these within an appropriate cost structure. Tight times have increasingly dictated that performance judgments include considerations of efficiency, and "performing" institutions are those which provide good value for the dollars expended.

Typical Performance Indicators in Research Institutions

Efficiency

- ratios of internal and external funding
 - comparative institutional costs for research, training, and other services
 - overhead/program cost ratio
 - number of outputs per researcher (publications per year, average value of grants per person, etc.)
 - costs per client served
 - costs per publication
 - costs vs. benefits
 - publication rates per staff
-

5.4 Relevance

The assessment should include some analysis of the continuing relevance of the research institution as a whole. Relevance in this context is defined as the ability to change to meet stakeholders' requirements over time.

Institutions in any society take time to evolve and develop. While all institutions inevitably face internal and external crises, the survivors are those that adapt to changing contexts and capacities. Over time they institutionalize in ways that consolidate their strengths. For long-term sustainability, a research institution must produce research that remains relevant to stakeholder needs, and it must be able to generate resources to support its activities.

Typical Performance Indicators in Research Institutions

Relevance

- support earmarked for professional development
 - number of old and new financial contributors (risk of discontinuance)
 - institutional innovation and adaptiveness (appropriate changes to needs, methodologies)
 - institutional reputation among key stakeholders
 - number of new services and programs
 - changes in services and programs related to changing client systems
-

6.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined a framework with which to assess the capacity and performance of a research institution within the context of the institution's motivation and its unique environment. Experience with a wide range of research institutions worldwide suggests that understanding of the environmental context is fundamental to a sympathetic analysis of how the institution operates. The environment may present difficult constraints, yet the institution may still be doing important and relevant work. Environmental analysis leads to a determination of capacity and performance relative to the context.

The institution's motivation relates in many ways to the environment, but supersedes it in the sense that many successful institutions rise above the constraints of their context. Through leadership and collective vision, such institutions are able to gather resources and produce quality research despite their unsupportive context. Such institutions are often nourished by external funding which make analysis and understanding of the context and motivation essential if IDRC is to invest strategically.

Because performance is relative to an institution's basic capacity, the analysis of capacity sets the stage for understanding institutional performance. Capacity is a quantitative notion, whereas performance is both absolute and relative. Performance needs to be assessed in qualitative terms, quantitative terms, and in terms which relate performance to basic institutional capacity.

Given sufficient time and resources, experts from IDRC can do a good job of assessing institutional partners. This might serve IDRC's short term needs, but the process can be far stronger when the partners themselves learn how to participate productively in the analysis. Ideally, the process can contribute to development of learning organizations fully capable of improving their own performance through critical self-analysis.