ACADEMIC
QUALITY ASSURANCE
OF NEW ZEALAND UNIVERSITIES

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New Zealand – Te Pōkai Tara and
the Academic Quality Agency for
New Zealand Universities*

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Quality assurance in the university sector ensures that academic processes are of an internationally respected standard. The quality assurance processes use evidence to check that goals are being achieved and that policies and practices are under ongoing review as part of an overall quality enhancement regime.

There are two bodies overseeing the quality assurance of universities: Universities New Zealand – Te Pōkai Tara's (Universities NZ's) Committee on University Academic Programmes and the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities.

« The Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP) is charged with setting up and applying qualification and regulation approval, accreditation and programme moderation procedures across universities.

« The Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) supports universities in their achievement of standards of excellence in research and teaching through regular institutional audit and the promotion of quality enhancement practices across the sector.

Background

«The 1990 amendment of the Education Act (1989) changed the educational landscape in New Zealand. It abolished the University Grants Committee and defined the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee (now operating as Universities NZ) as the statutory body with primary responsibility for quality assurance matters in the university sector, including the authority to exercise powers with regard to compliance, approval and accreditation. Following these changes, Universities NZ delegated responsibility for approval and accreditation functions to CUAP, powers that are the responsibility of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) elsewhere in the tertiary sector.

At the same time, several other countries were beginning to establish procedures for the management of standards and quality in universities. The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) was established in 1991 with the objective of developing and promoting good practices in the maintenance and improvement of quality in higher education.

In May 1992, the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee made a collective decision that all universities would be subject to academic audit. AQA (previously known as the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit) was established in 1993 and the first audits were conducted in 1995.»

Key principles

Quality assurance activities are underpinned by ten principles:

1. **Developed by the universities** CUAP and AQA were established by the universities and operate with their full support. Their functions and operating procedures are regularly reviewed.

2. **Evidence-based** Universities are required to provide evidence of how their activities and processes meet their stated standards and objectives. Evidence is examined and assessed by peers throughout the quality assurance process.

3. **Enhancement-led** Quality assurance is focused on the identification of goals and standards, and the charting of progress towards them. AQA underpins this process by revisiting previous audit recommendations and by facilitating the sharing of good practice in New Zealand universities and abroad.

4. **Founded on self-review** Academic quality is ultimately the responsibility of each university. CUAP's moderation processes and AQA's audit cycles begin with self-review. CUAP and AQA are regularly evaluated by independent panels in audit processes that also begin with self-review.

5. **Assured by peer review** National and international peer review is a critical element of teaching and research within a university, and is a fundamental component of the quality assurance system. CUAP uses peer review to evaluate proposals from the universities and to moderate recently introduced programmes. AQA audits are conducted by a panel of auditors comprising peers who are national and international experts.

6. **Collective and collegial** CUAP and AQA function with the cooperation of all New Zealand universities and the engagement and expertise of individuals representing key stakeholders such as students, employers, professionals and other members of the universities' communities.

7. **Individually binding** All universities are subject to the requirements, and bound by the decisions, of the quality assurance system.

8. **Internationally endorsed** International auditors are a feature of every AQA audit panel, and CUAP and AQA procedures are informed by professional relationships with similar international agencies. The New Zealand universities' quality assurance system is consistent with international guidelines for good practice and its quality assurance processes are regularly held up as an exemplar for other countries.

9. **Independently operated** Universities NZ (the parent organisation of CUAP and AQA) operates independently of government. AQA operates autonomously of Universities NZ with a separate board, staff and independently appointed auditors.

10. **Publicly accountable** The principles, procedures and reports of AQA's activities are available to the public through the AQA website. CUAP policies are publically available through its Handbook.

Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP)

« *CUAP considers academic matters including inter-university course approval and moderation procedures, advice and comment on academic developments, encouragement of the coherent and balanced development of curricula and the facilitation of cross-crediting between qualifications.*

CUAP developed out of the Curriculum Committee of the disestablished University Grants Committee, and has the delegated authority of Universities NZ for academic approval and accreditation functions. CUAP comprises a representative of each university and is chaired by a Vice-Chancellor. Its membership includes a student representative.

CUAP is the body to which universities must submit any proposals to offer new qualifications or to make substantial changes to existing qualifications. Proposals must meet official criteria which are set by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). These criteria apply to all qualifications offered by tertiary education providers and are set after consulting with Universities NZ and others in the tertiary sector. The criteria address the following items:

- Qualification to which the programme leads;
- Title, aims, learning outcomes and coherence;
- Delivery methods;
- Acceptability of the programme and consultation;
- Regulations;
- Assessment and moderation;
- Assessment and review; and
- Research required for degrees and postgraduate qualifications.

CUAP uses a peer review process to evaluate proposals from the universities, which range from new qualifications and subjects to changed entry requirements and altered subject names. A proposal has to proceed through various deliberative bodies in a university before it reaches CUAP, where it is subjected to peer review. CUAP receives proposals, initiates the peer review process, makes any necessary changes and approves proposals in two annual rounds. Those proposals which at least one university is unable to support are discussed by the Committee. While the outcome is often favourable, there are occasions when the Committee requires some changes or declines the proposal. The Committee's decisions are reported to Universities NZ. Since 1990, CUAP has approved over 1,200 new university qualifications and noted the deletion of over 500.

Once a university qualification has been approved by CUAP it is listed on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) and is eligible for funding from the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC). Universities apply for funding by submitting details of the new qualification to the TEC. The NZQF is a publicly available, comprehensive list of all quality assured qualifications in New Zealand.

CUAP operates a moderation process as a follow-up to the initial approval of qualifications. Universities are required to conduct formal reviews of all new programmes within three years of the graduation of the first cohort of students. These reviews involve an appointed convener and at least one panel member from another disciplinary area. CUAP considers the review and where the committee has serious concerns about a programme, it has the power to order changes, seek a second report, require a further review or withdraw approval.

In New Zealand, the university entrance standard is set by NZQA. CUAP's Sub-Committee on University Entrance was established to coordinate advice from

universities to NZQA with respect to a common standard of entrance to universities. The sub-committee also provides information on the administration of discretionary entrance, coordinates the evaluation of overseas qualifications presented for the purposes of admission, evaluates university foundation programmes offered by non-university providers in New Zealand, offers policy advice on matters related to the secondary-tertiary interface, and ensures university staff are appropriately involved in curriculum development and examination in the senior secondary school.

CUAP was audited in 1996, 1999, 2005 and 2011. »

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Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA)

«*AQA is an independent body whose purpose is to contribute to the advancement of university education by:*

- Engaging as a leader and advocate in the development of academic quality;

- Applying quality assurance and quality enhancement processes that assist universities in improving student engagement, academic experience and learning outcomes.

AQA aims to support universities in achieving standards of excellence in research and teaching. It does so, primarily, by conducting institutional audits. It also identifies and disseminates information on good practice in developing and maintaining quality in higher education and convenes regular meetings and conferences on quality enhancement in the sector.

AQA's governing Board is appointed by Universities NZ and includes nominations from the Vice-Chancellors, the Tertiary Education Union, students and appropriately experienced persons drawn from the wider community. AQA is operationally independent of Universities NZ.

Academic audits are carried out by panels of auditors who are trained by AQA and appointed from AQA's Register of Auditors and Reviewers.

Each panel includes an overseas external auditor. Auditors are generally senior academic staff and other people with knowledge of universities, academic auditing and/or evaluation.

An audit begins with a process of self-review, creating an audit portfolio that the university uses to evaluate its progress towards achieving the goals and objectives related to the focus of the audit. The audit panel verifies the portfolio through documentary analysis, interviews and site visits. Final audit reports, which are publicly available, commend good practice and make recommendations intended to assist the university in its own programme of continuous improvement. Progress on the recommendations is submitted to the Board of AQA in a follow-up report 12 months later. A report on progress in implementing the recommendations of the previous audit also forms part of the self-review process in the next audit round.

There have been four complete cycles of audit since AQA was established:

- Cycle 1: 1995-1998 – whole-of-institution;
- Cycle 2: 2000-2001 – research, and a theme chosen by the institution;
- Cycle 3: 2002-2007 – teaching and learning;
- Cycle 4: 2008-2012 – whole-of-institution.

Cycle 5 audits, which commenced in 2013, are whole-of-institution audits based on a framework of guideline statements.

AQA maintains professional relationships with all quality assurance bodies working in tertiary education in New Zealand, and with similar agencies internationally. It is a full member of INQAAHE and has been assessed as adhering to its Guidelines of Good Practice in Quality Assurance.

AQA is subject to regular independent review by a panel of national and international experts. It was last reviewed in 2009, and before that in 2001 and 1998. »

Quality within the Universities

« *The quality assurance activities of CUAP and AQA do not occur in a vacuum.*

Universities' systems for monitoring and enhancing quality in their teaching and learning, research and administrative activities, and facilities, are ongoing and subject to regular internal and external review including:

- Internal programme approval and review processes;
- Departmental reviews;
- Student course and programme evaluations;
- The use of external examiners;
- Regular review and comparison of course and programme data (such as grades, pass rates and completion rates);
- Student surveys;
- Staff performance reviews;
- Professional diploma and degree accreditation reviews;
- Engagement with professional, employer, statutory and regulatory bodies; and
- Research funding bodies.

Assessment of universities' research performance is carried out by the TEC via the Performance-Based Research Fund quality evaluations. These have taken place in 2003, 2006 and 2012. Universities have regular interactions with government agencies including financial management monitoring undertaken by the Ministry of Education and the TEC. Quality assurance in the sector is aided by Ako Aotearoa – The National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, which advises on good teaching practice and activities which facilitate excellent student learning.

More information about universities' quality systems, policies and processes can be found on the websites of the individual universities. **»**

Links for more information:

Universities New Zealand – Te Pōkai Tara
Includes links to the websites of New Zealand's eight universities **www.universitiesnz.ac.nz**

Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP) Includes the "Committee on University Academic Programmes Handbook 2013-2014" **www.universitiesnz.ac.nz/aboutus/sc/cuap**

Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) Includes published audit reports, details of upcoming audits, and resources to support good practice **www.aqa.ac.nz**

International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)
Includes the INQAAHE Guidelines of Good Practice in Quality Assurance **www.inqaahe.org**

New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)
www.nzqa.govt.nz

New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF)
Comprehensive list of all quality assured qualifications in New Zealand **www.nzqf.govt.nz**

Tertiary Education Commission (TEC)
www.tec.govt.nz

Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF)
www.tec.govt.nz/Funding/Fund-finder

Ako Aotearoa
www.akoaotearoa.ac.nz

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