



Process Review of Cycle 5 Academic Audit

Sheelagh Matear
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*Te Pokapū Kōunga Mātauranga
mō ngā Whare Wānanga o Aotearoa*

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All views expressed in this report, and any remaining errors or omissions, remain the responsibility of the author.

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Abstract

The Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) undertakes academic audits of universities as part of its external quality assurance responsibilities. Between 2013 and 2016 AQA undertook a fifth cycle of academic audits, focusing on teaching and learning and student support, including postgraduate students. AQA seeks feedback on its own activities and uses that feedback to help inform future developments. This paper provides a review of Cycle 5 Academic Audit with reference to the coverage of the audit framework and audit processes. It first examines the coverage of the Cycle 5 Audit Framework, drawing on feedback from audit panel members and universities, alignment with other frameworks and commendations, affirmations and recommendations elicited through use of the Cycle 5 Framework. It then uses feedback from panel members and universities to review audit processes, before presenting conclusions and implications. Lessons for Cycle 6 are identified throughout the paper.

For Cycle 5, feedback was sought from panel members and universities after an audit report had been released, using templates of structured questions. Feedback was not consistently provided by all panel members nor all universities through this mechanism. Cycle 6 should consider further how, when and from what perspectives feedback is sought.

Feedback and other analysis found the coverage of the Cycle 5 Audit Framework to be appropriate and no major gaps are considered to exist. It was also found to be a robust means of enabling audit panels to provide a fair assessment of the quality of a university's processes. Nonetheless, opportunities to enhance the framework, and its support of a coherent narrative of university quality processes, have been identified. They include further attention being paid to evidence within self-reviews and strengthening the self-evaluative nature of self-review reports. These will be developed further in workshops with university Quality Managers to prepare for Cycle 6.

The review of audit processes reinforced the importance of the self-review component of academic audit and the ongoing importance of site visits. Site visits are a demanding part of the audit process for both universities and audit panels and the insight and conduct of panel members was valued in Cycle 5. Other panel processes, including communication of findings to universities, were found to be appropriate and effective. Opportunities to enhance audit processes, so that site visits are most effective, include changing the meeting schedule for audit panels and considering the purpose of different categories of questions to be asked in site visit interviews. This paper outlines factors to be considered in refreshing the AQA Register of Auditors and Reviewers and in forming audit panels for Cycle 6 Academic Audit.

Audit panels and universities considered they had been well supported by AQA throughout Cycle 5. However, academic audit is a significant undertaking and this review identifies additional opportunities for workshops, guides and other materials to support Cycle 6. In so doing, it supports AQA's purpose of contributing to the advancement of New Zealand university education through quality enhancement and quality assurance.

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Introduction

The Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) forms part of the external quality assurance framework for New Zealand universities. In its quality assurance role, it undertakes periodic, institutional review of New Zealand's universities in the form of an academic audit. Audits are undertaken by a panel of experienced and qualified peers, including at least one international panel member, and their reports are publicly available on the AQA website¹.

AQA and the New Zealand universities engaged in a fifth cycle of academic audit between 2013 and 2016². Cycle 5 audits focused on “teaching and learning and student support, including postgraduate study” (Cameron, 2013, p5.) and utilised a new audit framework of 40 guideline statements³. The guideline statements “refer to activities and quality assurance processes which might be expected as fundamental in a contemporary university of good standing” (Cameron, 2013, p9).

This paper is one of three that reviews the fifth cycle of academic audit of New Zealand universities undertaken by AQA. It focuses on the coverage and process aspects of Cycle 5. The other two papers will review themes in commendations, affirmations and recommendations made by audit panels across the eight universities and the impact of academic audits as indicated by universities' one-year follow-up reports to their academic audit. The impact paper will be developed once the one-year follow-up reports have been completed by all universities.

AQA has a quality support objective to “ensure effective processes and adequate resourcing to achieve [quality assurance and quality enhancement] objectives at a high level of satisfaction for universities and other stakeholders” (AQA, 2013). As part of addressing and assessing its progress on this objective, AQA seeks feedback from panels and universities on their experience with academic audit. This paper considers that feedback on Cycle 5 and identifies lessons for Cycle 6 Academic Audit.

The processes through which feedback was gained are set out in the Method section below. The body of the paper then comprises two sets of analyses – the first considering the coverage of the audit framework and the second reviewing process aspects of Cycle 5. Lessons for Cycle 6 are identified throughout the paper. Finally, conclusions and further implications are presented. It is anticipated that this paper will be of use primarily to professional quality staff in universities and AQA as they both consider Cycle 6 Academic Audit.

Cycle 6 Academic Audit will “build on and refresh the Cycle 5 academic audit framework” (AQA 2017a). This paper informs the refresh and redevelopment of the audit framework for Cycle 6. Although the first audit in Cycle 6 is not anticipated until 2021 (and there is the potential for further development of the framework as a consequence of enhancement theme activities that universities will focus on between 2017 and 2019), it is considered important to refresh the Cycle 5 framework at this time. The reasons for this are:

¹ www.aqa.ac.nz

² Although Cycle 5 for a university does not formally conclude until the AQA Board has accepted the one-year follow-up report for the university, the final audit report in the Cycle was published in December 2016.

³ <http://www.aqa.ac.nz/sites/all/files/AQA%20Cycle%205%20Framework%20Jan2013.pdf>

- Provision needs to exist for an audit to be conducted earlier than the anticipated 7-8 years (Cycle 6: Component F).
- To be able to make greatest use of feedback and experiences of Cycle 5.
- To inform universities' preparation for the audit component of Cycle 6.

It is noted however, that other issues between now and 2020 may prompt further refinement of the audit framework. These could include changes consequent on the government's response to the Productivity Commission's report into "New models of tertiary education" and the development of a new Tertiary Education Strategy.

Method

Feedback on their experience of Cycle 5 academic audit was sought from audit panel members and universities via a structured template of questions. The questions were emailed to audit panel members when the audit report was released and sent to universities approximately six weeks after the report had been released.

Feedback was provided from six universities and 16 panel members undertaking audits of universities. One university which did not provide a response indicated that they considered a meeting between the University and the incoming Executive Director (undertaken as part of her orientation activities) had covered the University's feedback on Cycle 5. This feedback was reported in a discussion paper that informed the development of Cycle 6 (Matear, 2016a). Debrief reports are only available for two universities as these stem from a recommendation made in the 2015 External Review of AQA "that there be a debriefing report compiled after each audit site visit, based on the feedback from universities and audit panel members, for discussion by the AQA Board". This recommendation was formalised for the last two academic audits in Cycle 5.

The first conclusion to be drawn is that feedback is not consistently provided by all auditors and universities and therefore, no university/audit-level analysis or interpretation is attempted in this paper. The response rates from audit panel members are low and attention needs to be given to improving this for Cycle 6. In other contexts where feedback is incomplete (or response rates are low), attention has been paid to the importance of 'closing the loop' to demonstrate that feedback is valued and is used. Other options to consider include amending the Panel Member Agreement to highlight the importance of feedback.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Consider how best to close the feedback loop with panel members and universities.

A second point to note is that feedback is only sought formally towards the conclusion of the process. Feedback, from audit panel members in particular, is gained throughout the process which spans almost six months from their receipt of a university's self-review portfolio to the publication of the audit report. Universities experience academic audit over a longer time period, although the start of the process depends largely on how universities manage their self-review processes. Universities may also provide some feedback throughout the process. However, the 'formal' feedback processes for Cycle 5 were largely retrospective, and while other feedback may have been useful and used, it has not necessarily been captured and codified.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Multiple feedback and response points within the audit process, or explicitly recording reflexive feedback at specific time points over the course of the audit process, should be considered.

Cycle 5 sought feedback from panel members and universities. Students were not asked for feedback on their experience of the process, although this could have been included in university feedback. Student associations were invited to provide a report or submission as part of the Cycle 5 process. Student submissions were provided for the audits of four universities, noting that the students of some universities may be represented by more than one students' association. It should be further noted that students' associations may have elected not to provide a submission as they were involved in their university's self-review processes and felt that the self-review adequately captured their perspectives.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Consider including students' perspectives in feedback processes.

The structured templates for feedback sought responses to questions in the following areas: (A) the Cycle 5 Framework in terms of its content and robustness; (B) the self-review report; (C) the audit process including the site visit; (D) support from AQA, functioning of the audit panels and auditor training; and (E) the report. Panel members and universities were also asked if they had any overarching or summary comments or suggestions for improvement. Further feedback was gained in meetings with universities conducted as part of the incoming Executive Director's establishment activities.

Comments from universities and panel members are indicated (*in italics*) in the following sections. However, individual universities and panel members are not identified and different sequences of responses are used throughout the paper. For most questions, all comments from universities and panel members have been used. Many comments are verbatim, with amendments only to preserve anonymity.

Cycle 5 Audit Framework

The Cycle 5 Academic Audit Framework comprised 40 guideline statements across seven 'Academic Activity Themes':

1. Leadership and management of teaching and learning;
2. Student profile: access, admission and transition processes;
3. Curriculum and assessment;
4. Student engagement and achievement;
5. Student feedback and support,
6. Teaching quality; and
7. Supervision of research students.

The relative specificity of having 40 guideline statements was a novel aspect of Cycle 5, compared with previous audits. This specificity reflected international developments at that time, particularly the development of the Quality Code in the UK and the Australian development of a Higher Education Standards Framework.

This section reviews the Cycle 5 Audit Framework from two perspectives. First, was the coverage of the Framework adequate and appropriate? This draws on comparisons with other frameworks and a

preliminary analysis of how the Framework ‘performed’ in terms of the pattern of commendations, affirmations and recommendations made by audit panels, as well as feedback from audit panel members and universities. Considerable caution does need to be exercised in undertaking a quasi-quantitative analysis of audit commendations, affirmations and recommendations as not all guideline statements are of the same size nor importance and the commendations, affirmations and recommendations made by an audit panel reflect the particular context of an individual university. This analysis was undertaken to assess whether there were parts of the framework that were attracting relatively little attention from audit panels or where only commendations were made. It is therefore intended to indicate the performance of the Audit Framework rather than the universities.

The second perspective considers how well having a framework worked in practice – or the ‘robustness’ of the Framework.

Framework Coverage

Panel members and universities generally considered the overall framework to be “sufficiently comprehensive to cover all processes which are critical to a university in facilitating academic quality for staff and students” (panel members) and “sufficiently comprehensive to address all the university’s core teaching, learning and student support objectives and activities” (universities).

Universities suggested that a guideline statement addressing institutional approaches to benchmarking could have been included as audit reports were placing emphasis on benchmarking. Other suggestions of potential gaps in the framework were:

- *The treatment of research (panel member);*
- *Postgraduate students (panel member);*
- *Staff feedback on support for teaching and learning (panel member);*
- *Closing the loop on feedback from students (panel member);*
- *Arrangements with partner organisations – particularly how student views are included (panel);*
- *How tikanga and mātuaranga Māori are incorporated into curriculum and assessment (university); and*
- *A lack of comparative evaluation against international best practice and/or international best practice benchmarking (panel member).*

With respect to the issue of whether and how research is included, the development of Cycle 5 considered that research quality was addressed by the research quality assessment component of the PBRF⁴. Research postgraduate students are considered in section 7 of the Cycle 5 framework; however, consideration of taught postgraduate students is included in other relevant guideline statements.

Some panel members indicated that the guideline statements themselves might impose a constraint on the audit and that the relationship to a university’s strategic directions and/plans might also impose a constraint. With respect to the latter point, although there is a common framework of guideline statements, universities should have been able to undertake the audit in a way that aligns with their priorities.

⁴ Performance-Based Research Fund, see <http://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/funding-and-performance/funding/fund-finder/performance-based-research-fund/>, accessed 201710110948

One university suggested that comprehensively addressing ALL (original emphasis) the university's core teaching, learning and student support activities was not possible within a single academic audit, and that academic audit should not try to do this. The university did however agree that the coverage within the thematic areas of Cycle 5 was appropriate.

In addition to identifying potential gaps in the Cycle 5 framework, universities and panel members also commented on possible areas of overlap between the guideline statements. Overlaps were suggested as follows:

- *Amongst the guidelines statements in section 4 (student engagement and achievement), where it was suggested that separating this theme into 5 guideline statements posed challenges (university).*
- *Between section 2 – Student Profile: Access, Admission and Transition Processes and section 4 – Student Engagement and Achievement (university).*
- *Section 2 and section 7, with respect to postgraduate students (university).*
- *GS 4.3 (Feedback to students) and GS 2.3 (Academic advice) and GS 4.4 (under-achieving students) (university).*
- *GS 2.2 (Access and transition) and GS 5.3 (Personal support and safety) (university).*
- *GS 3.2 (Graduate attributes) and GS 3.3 (Graduate outcomes) (university).*
- *GS 3.3 (Graduate outcomes) and GS 5.6 (Feedback from graduates) (university).*
- *GS 6.5 (Teaching support on other campuses) and GS 5.4 (Support on other campuses) (university).*

With the exception of the potential overlap between GS 3.2 Graduate attributes and GS 3.3 Graduate outcomes, the majority of these overlaps were suggested by one university. This university used these as examples of decisions they had taken as to where material in the self-review report had been placed. Another university commented that while [some] guideline statements were “inherently interconnectedthe approach and document could accommodate overlaps”.

Other feedback on the guideline statements and coverage of the framework were:

- *Suggesting that GS 2.2 was too narrowly focused on equity or other priority groups (university).*
- *More direction regarding what was meant by ‘student engagement’ in the context of the Cycle 5 academic audit (university).*
- *Section 1 (Leadership and management of teaching and learning) “could have been trimmed down” (university).*

The above comments indicate that some reconsideration of the content (the number and specific phrasing of (some) guideline statements) is warranted in refreshing the framework for use in Cycle 6. In undertaking a reconsideration of the content of the framework, attention should also be paid to other frameworks (in particular, the UK Quality Code⁵, Australia's Higher Education Standards Framework⁶,

⁵ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code>, accessed 201710110951; noting that at the end of 2017 the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment was consulting on a review of the Quality Code, <https://ukscqa.org.uk/what-we-do/consultation-on-the-uk-quality/>, accessed 201801081713.

⁶ <http://www.tegsa.gov.au/tegsa-contextual-overview-hes-framework>, accessed 201710110954.

INQAAHE's Guidelines of Good Practice⁷ and ESG's Standards and Guidelines⁸) and themes or trends in commendations, affirmations and recommendations in the Cycle 5 audit reports. These are considered in the following sections.

Comparison with other frameworks

Reviewing the coverage of the UK's Quality Code (QC) and Australia's Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) raises the question of whether the following issues are sufficiently covered in the Cycle 5 framework:

- Credit transfer and recognition of prior learning – both the QC and HESF have an explicit expectation or standard.
- Whether student input should be strengthened to student 'partnership' (see QC B5 and HESF 6.3.3)
- Whether developing students' academic, personal and professional potential (QC B4) should be addressed more fully? GS 3.3 does address this, but has tended to be in the context of a university-level graduate profile.
- Whether delegations should be broadened to academic governance (HESF 6.3)?

The coverage of the Cycle 5 academic audit framework has also been 'mapped' against the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)'s 'Key Evaluation Questions' (KEQs)⁹. The KEQs are used in NZQA's External Evaluation and Review of institutions to determine their ongoing quality assurance status. The main area of coverage that is included in the EER and not in Cycle 5 is (the new) KEQ 6 "How effectively are important compliance accountabilities managed?". It is suggested that this is not within the remit of academic audit and is adequately addressed within the universities' wider accountability frameworks.

Summary of Cycle 5 Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations

An analysis of themes arising from commendations, affirmations and recommendations in Cycle 5 Academic Audit reports will be undertaken in the second paper in this series. For the purposes of considering how the Cycle 5 Framework has 'performed', this section identifies guideline statements for which few (2 or less) commendations, affirmations or recommendations were made, and guideline statements that generated only commendations.

Out of the 40 guideline statements, there are only two for which no commendations, affirmations or recommendations were made. These were:

- GS 6.5 (Teaching support on other campuses)
- GS 7.4 (Thesis examination)

It is suggested that having assurance that thesis examination processes reflect national and international standards is important and should be retained.

Two or fewer commendations, affirmations and recommendations were made for a further eight guideline statements:

⁷ <http://www.inqaahe.org/guidelines-good-practice>, accessed 201710110955.

⁸ http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf, accessed 201710110956.

⁹ <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/self-assessment/make-self-assessment-happen/tools-and-resources/key-evaluation-questions/>, accessed 201710110958.

- GS 2.1 (Admission and selection)
- GS 3.4 (Programme review)
- GS 3.7 (Equivalence of learning outcomes – other campuses and/or partners)
- GS 4.3 (Feedback to students)
- GS 4.4 (Under-achieving students)
- GS 4.5 (High achieving students)
- GS 5.4 (Support on other campuses)
- GS 5.6 (Feedback from graduates)

Admission and selection and more broadly ‘information for learners’ are likely to continue to be relevant issues for New Zealand universities. Following both the Quality Code and the HESF, it is suggested that this guideline statement be retained. The 2017 external review of the Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP) (AQA, 2017b) contains a recommendation that “CUAP discuss how institutional and professional programme reviews might best be used by CUAP for moderation processes, and that it develop and implement a process whereby the outcomes of instructional programme reviews are reported and analysed by or for CUAP so that issues and good practice of potential sector impact may be identified” (p12). Consideration needs to be given as to whether this guideline statement is retained in the framework or whether CUAP processes are considered to be sufficient.

There are four guideline statements that received only commendations:

- GS 3.9 (Assessment in te reo Māori)
- GS 5.2 (Learning support)
- GS 5.3 (Personal Support and Safety)
- GS 6.6 (Teaching recognition)

Given New Zealand universities are engaging with an enhancement theme broadly titled “Access, Opportunities and Outcomes for Māori learners and for Pasifika learners”, it is suggested that GS 3.9 is retained, but note that it may be amended as an outcome of the enhancement theme. The need for universities to articulate their good teaching practices and how it is recognised is a current issue. This guideline statement should be retained, but possibly amended to be less directive about how teaching is recognised and rewarded.

A thematic analysis of Cycle 5 audit reports is under development as the second paper in this series.

Lessons for Cycle 6 – framework coverage

The section above has considered the coverage of the Cycle 5 Audit Framework, as articulated in the guideline statements, from the perspectives of universities, panel members, relative to two other recently developed frameworks, and in terms of the pattern of commendations, affirmations and recommendations across guideline statements. Lessons for Cycle 6 are that the coverage of the Cycle 5 audit framework is generally appropriate. However, consideration of feedback, comparison with other frameworks, and review of commendations, affirmations and recommendations leads to the following changes being suggested for the framework for the audit component of Cycle 6:

- Broaden GS 1.1 (Delegations) to academic governance, following HESF 6.3.
- Add or amend a guideline statement to include credit transfer and recognition of prior learning.

- Amend GS 1.3 (Student input) to student 'partnership', following B5 in the UK Quality Code.
- Bring student feedback (GS 5.5, 5.6, possibly 7.5) into section 1. The rationale for this is that student feedback is relevant to planning and other university-level quality processes and outcomes.
- Delete 'other campus' GS (5.4, 6.5) and include as a 'cross-cutting' theme to be addressed by universities as appropriate. This would also include delivery with partners. Alternatively, include a guideline statement that addresses non-traditional (off-campus, distance, e-, partners) delivery explicitly.
- Consider whether more explicit reference should be made to industry/employer engagement and graduate 'work-readiness'.
- Move GS 3.5 (benchmarking programmes) into Section 1 and broaden, or delete. The reason for considering deleting is that benchmarking could be seen as an indication of 'how' a university could operate, rather than a guideline statement for which a university demonstrates how it achieves its objectives. Conversely, given that 4 universities received recommendations and 2 universities affirmations with respect to this GS in Cycle 5, it could be considered an ongoing and relevant issue for universities. Alternatively, this GS could be reframed to focus on how a university assures itself that its outcome standards are appropriate (Matear, 2016b).
- Re-assess the relationship and differences between GS 3.2 (graduate attributes) and GS 3.3 (graduate outcomes).
- Reframe GS 3.3 (Graduate outcomes) more broadly to encompass 'academic, personal and professional development, following B4 of the UK Quality Code.
- Reframe GS 5.3 (Personal support and safety) more broadly as student well-being.
- Collapse Sections 2 (Student profile: access, admission and transition processes) and 4 (Student engagement and achievement) into a single section.

Consideration was also given to whether postgraduate students should continue to be treated as a separate 'academic activity area'. It is suggested that this treatment be retained as it is consistent with both the UK Quality Code and Australia's HESF.

In addition to the suggestions above, other issues which could be considered include:

- How should 'cross-cutting' themes be included? In Cycle 5, guideline statements reflected, *inter alia*, the requirements of the Education Act (1989 and amendments), in particular those for research-informed degree teaching, university obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, requirements under the Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students. Some guideline statements explicitly reflected these, but otherwise they, and other aspects such as delivery modes and learner diversity, were expected to be addressed as appropriate for individual universities and their students.
- Is the framework sufficiently 'future-proofed' or are there significant emerging issues (for example graduate work-readiness and engagement with industry/employer stakeholders) that should be included?

The redevelopment of the Cycle 5 Audit Framework for use in Cycle 6 will be considered further in workshops with university quality managers.

Robustness - how the framework worked in practice

This section considers how well the framework worked in practice. It does this by drawing on feedback from panel members and universities. Panel members were asked if they considered the framework to be “sufficiently robust to provide a fair assessment of university processes” and whether the framework “enables one to identify where a university might be at risk or poor processes or of processes which might deliver poor outcomes”.

Overall, panel members agreed that the Framework was sufficiently robust. However, they also made a number of comments that are relevant for Cycle 6, as did universities. These were:

- *That the use of guideline statements created an ‘atomised’ approach and the ‘fragmentation of statements made it difficult to present information efficiently ...’.* (university)
- *That the framework assisted in a “focus on details, however it somewhat detracted from an overview perspective”* (panel member)
- *That the guideline statements may reduce everything to being of equal importance (panel member, university) and that panels did not have “a mechanism to ignore items which it thinks are unimportant”* (panel member).
- *Similarly, that there is too much focus on individual issues and sight of the bigger picture is lost.*
- *That the framework could lead auditors to “lean to towards a pass/fail mentality”* (panel member).
- *That the framework doesn’t “encourage consistent interpretation” and is more “permissive” than desirable* (panel member).
- *That “too close attention to the guideline statements can be misleading”* (panel member).
- *That the framework “encourages repetition, which makes the self-review portfolio challengingboringto read”* (panel member).
- *That while the framework is “sufficiently robust to make an assessment of the processes as documented” by a university ... it “is not sufficiently robust to ensure that those processes are followed”* (panel member).

The issue of whether the level of the Framework compromised a coherent narrative and holistic assessment has been raised previously. Other feedback from some universities has been that they were pleased that the Framework did still permit coherence and allowed universities to generate their own narrative and be audited as individual universities.

Lessons for Cycle 6 include:

- While universities need to make their own decisions on how best to conduct and present their self-review, expectations regarding narrative should be explicit in guidance to universities and audit handbooks.
- Audit handbooks should retain guidance that the academic audit is an ‘all of university audit’. However, it is not considered that the audit methodology supports an all of university summative evaluation.
- Consideration should be given to the sequencing of sections and guideline statements to facilitate the development of a coherent narrative in the self-review report.

While the majority of panel members considered that the Framework “enables one to identify where a university might be at risk or poor processes or of processes which might deliver poor outcomes”, they also commented as follows:

- *... not convinced that there is enough detailed discussion or information to easily reach that conclusion. Portfolios tend to be public relations documents the panel needs to drill down to be able to make clear statements about ‘poor’ processes ... sometimes that doesn’t become evident until well through the visitin part because the visit interviews start at the top of the university ... but only at lower levels will evidence of “poor ‘process emerge.*
- *... my concern is that a panel may miss issues because of an inability to dig deep enough. As a result, a panel has to take some of the claims made on trust, especially when these are looking forward to processes that may apply in the future.*
- *I think that it is possible to identify areas where academic quality might be at risk because its processes are poor but less able to identify processes which might deliver poor outcomes.*
- *That the execution of policy by leadership is key and this is difficult to assess.*
- *That the potential to identify poor processes is dependent on the ability of the Panel.*
- *That the framework provided a good starting point and that meetings with staff could uncover both good and poor processes.*

Other comments made by panel members regarding the use of the Cycle 5 Framework (gaps identified in this section are included above) were:

- *That use of the framework seemed bureaucratic at times and panels were constrained by the phrasing of the guidelines and previous recommendations.*
- *That there was limited opportunity to go beyond the guideline statements without risking objection from the university.*
- *Whether the use of peers on audit panels constrains panel comments in reports and contributed to audits being too inwardly focused.*

These comments provide further useful feedback on the use of an audit framework of this sort.

Lessons for Cycle 6: The framework should provide structure and a starting point, but is not intended to act as a constraint.

Having considered the coverage and use of the Audit Framework in practice, the next section of this paper considers audit processes.

Audit processes

In addition to questions on the coverage and robustness of the Audit Framework itself, universities and panel members were asked for feedback on a range of other audit processes. Audit processes are set out in detail in the handbooks for Cycle 5 (Cameron, 2013). In brief, they comprise (p6):

- A self-review by the university;
- Preparation and submission of a self-review portfolio, including a self-review report and supporting documents;
- Consideration of the self-review portfolio by an independent external audit panel;
- A site visit undertaken by the panel;

- An audit report, which is made public; and
- A one-year follow-up report submitted by the university to the AQA Board.

Due to the timeframes in which feedback is sought from universities and panel members, no feedback was sought on the one-year follow-up processes and report. Given that Cycle 6 will incorporate a mid-cycle report, consideration should also be given to seeking feedback on follow-up processes.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Consider how best to gain feedback on follow-up processes.

Self-review

Self-review is the basis for academic audit activities and is one of the principles that underpin quality assurance activities in universities¹⁰. Universities and panel members were both asked questions about the self-review.

Universities were asked whether they received “sufficient and/or appropriate guidance [on] the self-review and preparation of the portfolio” and whether they had any comments on “the process of conducting the self-review and preparing the self-review portfolio”. Responses from universities indicated that:

- *AQA staff were approachable.*
- *Although advice was sufficient, more guidance or additional workshops would have been useful. Some universities commented that they had found it helpful to meet with colleagues from other universities to discuss their approach, particularly given the new approach in using guideline statements, including guidance in addressing potential overlaps.*
- *A specific point with respect to advice and/or guidance was whether or not an ‘overarching’ or ‘introductory’ narrative was required. This relates to earlier comments regarding the potential for fragmentation with the use of a quite detailed framework and associated challenges in maintaining coherence.*
- *Similarly, universities commented that it would have been useful to have had specific advice on whether a ‘tabular’ format was acceptable for the self-review report, and the understanding of an appropriate and acceptable format needed to be consistent between the university, AQA and the panel.*

Panel members were asked about portfolio formats and presentation. All, except one, indicated that they would like to receive the self-review report in both printed and electronic form. One panel member indicated that they preferred print. Only one panel member indicated that they would prefer to receive supporting documents in printed form, with others indicating a range of preferences among electronic documents, hyperlinks from a website or Dropbox (or similar). Universities used a range of platforms and systems to present their self-review portfolios. The conclusion seems to be that the readability of the portfolio is more important than the specific platform. Some panel members provided specific comments on their preferences for portfolio formats as follows:

- *I like continuous text with links and supporting documents clearly identified and easily visible (perhaps in boxes beside or below each section).*

¹⁰ Academic Quality Assurance of New Zealand Universities, a joint publication of Universities New Zealand – Te Pūkai Tara and the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities, July 2013.

- *A poorly constructed and edited [self-review report] will antagonise a panel before they even get going.*
- *The structure of the self-review report was fine. It would have been better, however, if it had been of a deeper more consistent quality. This would have probably involved more staff being consulted and involved in its preparation. An effort should be made to produce a quality document that is faithful to the thinking on each issue of the institution as a whole.*
- *The self-review report was not helpful or well-constructed and in many cases was weak on evidence.*
- *Text please, not tabulated. It should read as an inviting document.*
- *I thought the xxx self-review was set out and linked very well. Most supporting docs should be hyperlinked; a small number however need to be printed.*
- *I think this has to be left to the university. What they decide to do in itself is an indicator of its approach to quality assurance. Clear indication of where documents are to be found and good referencing and document headings are useful.*
- *I thought xxx's way of doing this was pretty much ideal. A few links didn't work, but those were minor faults.*
- *The portfolio wasn't particularly well written. My advice would be not to release the document until it has been thoroughly evaluated by the senior executive both for content, style and errors. Repetition was evident and it wasn't always clear to me how the dots joined up.*
- *Encourage them to use the opportunity to be open and honestly deal with the issues.*
- *The xxx report was good in that it was the right length and didn't go overboard.*
- *Xxx's report was well put together and easy to follow, even if the style varied somewhat between Activity Themes.*
- *When hyperlinking to a provided document give "reading instructions" or the appropriate area of the document that the reader needs to focus on to find the evidence required. Some of these documents are large and panels can spend a long time looking for the appropriate evidence aspect in such a document.*

While, to some extent, some of these are 'technical' issues, there needs to be a shared understanding between the university and audit panel as to how the self-review is used. This understanding is likely to be enhanced by including senior quality staff in audit panels. A further suggestion, that has been previously made by universities, is for quality staff to assist AQA in providing secretariat functions for audits, particularly the site visit.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Be explicit about expectations of the self-review report in audit handbook, guides and workshops and developing this guidance further in workshops with universities and panel members.

Encourage senior professional quality staff to seek membership of the AQA Register of Auditors and Reviewers.

Explore opportunities for professional quality staff to gain experience of academic audit and other quality assurance activities outside of their own university.

University comments on the process of conducting the self-review and preparing the self-review portfolio covered:

- *Surprise at the number of additional documents that were required.*
- *Noting that quantitative rather than qualitative information was sought.*
- *Significant time commitments and need for internal co-ordination.*
- *Usefulness of faculty working groups in undertaking the self-review.*
- *That a consultative and iterative process worked well.*
- *Usefulness of the ‘questions the university might ask itself’ in the Audit Handbook.*
- *‘Unevenness’ in feedback received within the university, leading to useful engagement with contributors.*
- *Time requirements to prepare the final portfolio, particularly with respect to checking hyperlinks and footnotes.*
- *Value of internal consultation in raising awareness.*
- *Useful consolidation of university activities.*
- *Challenges in dealing with internal change.*
- *Benefits of adopting an electronic platform for the self-review.*
- *Use of single (or lead) authors as opposed to teams, noting that teams offer wider perspective and greater expertise and experience. While a lead author is simpler logistically, challenges may arise with over-reliance on a key individual.*

Again, these comments provide a useful contribution to the sort of advice and guidance to be included in audit handbooks, guides and workshops. They should be included in an operationalisation plan for Cycle 6.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Consider whether a schedule of good-practice workshops should be developed.

Panel members were asked three questions regarding the self-review report and supporting documents:

1. Whether it covered the framework comprehensively.
2. Whether it provided adequate evidence to support claims made in the report.
3. Whether it enabled a sense of the overall quality of the university’s academic processes.

Responses to these questions from panel members varied (Table 1) and raise points to be considered further.

Table 1 Audit framework comprehensiveness, evidence adequacy and overall quality

Question	Yes	No	Mixed
Comprehensiveness	8	3	5
Adequacy of evidence	3	4	8
Overall quality	9	4	3

Panel members commented on the comprehensiveness of the self-review portfolio as follows:

- *All areas were addressed, but in varying amounts of detail and engagement.*

- *Not necessarily. It was patchy in many areas ... and different sections seemed to have variable depth. Some responses did not answer the GSs*
- *... it didn't tell a story about the quality enhancement or overall approach. More cross examination than expected was required on some key areas.*
- *The self-review report was of varying quality*
- *.... it left a great deal to be uncovered by the panel. It did the University a disservice, and failed to provide a helpful picture of the institution.*
- *... good: not too long and to the point.*
- *The self-review report was extremely focused on the Guideline statements and to some extent restricted where the panel could go in its evaluation.*
- *It did, but some of the [assessments] were not necessarily understood or accepted by all those interviewed.*
- *... the university could have been more self-critical in the report and using the opportunity to really examine issues it needs to confront.*
- *Yes, particularly because we can go back for more after the initial panel meeting.*
- *Yes, and the hyperlinks were typically very helpful.*
- *Yes overall very comprehensive, some areas light on evidence eg benchmarking. The university was undertaking this in a more comprehensive manner than initially presented.*

These comments provide further useful advice to be considered in workshops preparing for Cycle 6.

Some of the above comments already touch on the second question as to whether the self-review portfolio provided adequate evidence to support the claims made in the report. Other comments made by panel members were:

- *Not necessarily. The panel had to look for some of the evidence.*
- *The quality of evidence in the report tended to vary across the different sections. Access to background documents did allow reasonably well evidenced understandings of the university's practices to be gained.*
- *Not always but then there wouldn't necessarily be much point to an audit if there were good processes and accompanying data for everything!*
- *Not in all cases.*
- *Usually yes, and when evidence was missing it could be sought separately.*
- *No. In several cases we needed further elaboration, which in most cases can be drawn out in discussion where other evidence can come to light.*
- *This improved with asking for more materials.*
- *... there will inevitably be an element of best foot forward by any institution, in this case [evidence] was pretty good (and easy enough to spot the flannel, but that after all is part of the role of auditors).*
- *Yes, although there is the usual problem of the changes that occur between completion of the self-review report and the actual audit.*
- *Overall yes, and assisted for requests for further evidence. There were still issues with hard evidence to demonstrate improvements.*

Although not asked directly, comments from panel members raised the issue of whether self-review reports were sufficiently self-critical or reflexive, i.e., were they really 'self-review' reports. This point is different to, but associated with the question of whether evidence to support claims was adequate. Panel members commented that:

- *Since there is very little self-evaluation in self-review reports, perhaps a separate self-evaluation privately given to the panel at the first meeting with the institution's senior management may be better? My feeling is that institutions spend a lot of time putting together the report in time for the visit and tend not to insert self-evaluations because they themselves have not had time to digest the contents of the self-review. Once the self-review is submitted, there is more time for reflection within the institution as it disseminates the contents of the self-review report to its academic sector for information. Perhaps comments from the academic sector back to senior management could then be used to help senior management put together an evaluative summary for the panel on the first day of the visit?*
- *Getting an institution to be self-evaluative is a hard thing to do, and I don't know of any guaranteed way to make this happen. But if we don't get self-evaluative reports, I'm not sure why we should continue to call these 'self-review' reports.*
- *[Self-review reports should] provide sufficient context and be a genuine self-review.*

Evidence is provided and/or developed through the site visits as well as the self-review reports. It is perhaps surprising that panel members' responses regarding evidence are variable, as evidence of effectiveness was not a new requirement for Cycle 5 academic audit. The relative specificity of the Cycle 5 Audit Framework may have contributed to this feedback. However, this feedback regarding evidence is significant given that Cycle 6 intends to make greater use of evidence (and metrics where appropriate).

Although self-review activities and processes are clearly the responsibility of the university, it may be worth exploring whether including critique and reflection steps in guidelines for self-review would be useful. For some universities, self-critique and reflection steps may be incorporated into the development of the self-review portfolio and report. Typically however, only a small number of people within a university have a sense of the overall self-review until it is about to be submitted and this may not facilitate a whole-of-university self-critique or critique across functional areas. A development process that is explicit about making time for whole-of-university and cross-functional critique and assessment might assist in this process.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Consider the provision and use of evidence in self-review reports further.
Consider whether being more explicit about self-reflection and critique in recommended timelines for audit would be useful.

Despite some equivocality of panel members as to whether the self-report portfolios provided adequate evidence, the majority of panel members indicated that portfolios did enable them to get a sense of the overall quality of the university's academic processes. Comments, other than yes or no, were:

- *Not really, I felt that some of the report did a disservice to [the university]. My sense of overall quality came later.*

- *The report provided an account of varying quality of the University processes. The necessary fuller understanding was only gained after consideration of the supporting documents and the interviewing of appropriate staff.*
- *... too much of a public relations document to impress the auditors. The overall length of the portfolio – made it difficult to separate out the important content from the padding.*
- *Only after considerable additional work.*
- *It was only the site visit that enabled this.*
- *The self-review report tends to be very bland and descriptive, except for areas where the institution is seeking affirmations. I'm not sure if there's anything that can be done to improve the evaluative nature of self-review reports.*

These comments reinforce the fact that while the self-review is an important part of the process, the site visit also remains an important component. The comments may also reflect some disparity in the expectations for Cycle 5 academic audits where it had been anticipated (and commented upon by universities) that it would have been possible for panels to reach conclusions on a number of guideline statements prior to the site visit. It appears that panels felt they still required the confirmation gained through the site visit to reach conclusions.

Further comment on the experience of the Cycle 5 site visit is considered below.

The Site Visit

The site visits for Cycle 5 occurred sixteen weeks after universities' self-review portfolios were submitted. Between the submission of the self-review portfolio and the site visit the panel reviewed the portfolio and met at least once. The Cycle 5 handbook specified that universities would be advised of the indicative programme and likely interviewees for the site visit seven weeks in advance of the site visit.

Universities were asked to provide feedback on their experience of the site visit as follows:

- Whether they received sufficient and/or appropriate guidance from AQA regarding the site visit and identification of interviewees;
- Whether they had any comments on the process of the site visit;
- Whether they had any comments on the conduct of the audit panel during the site visit; and
- Whether they received sufficient support from AQA during the site visit.

Panel members were also asked whether the site visit interviews were generally effective in terms of:

- Appropriate people [being] at interview sessions;
- [Having] appropriate questions for the people in the sessions;
- Interviews overall [being] able to cover all issues of interest to the panel;
- [Having] sufficient time for interviews; and
- [Having] sufficient time between interviews for the panel to debrief and prepare.

Panel member responses are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Interviews

	Yes/positive	No/negative	Mixed/equivocal
Appropriate people at interview sessions	6	2	8
Appropriate questions for people in sessions	11	--	4
Interviews able to cover all issues of interest	9	1	5
Sufficient time for interviews.	12	1	4
Sufficient time between interviews	9	5	2

With respect to guidance on the site visit and identification of interviewees, two universities indicated that this was either sufficient or worked well overall. Other feedback from universities was that:

- *They were surprised by the scale of the visit, having understood that Cycle 5 would be a 'lighter touch' recognising the relative maturity of quality assurance systems in New Zealand universities.*
- *The fact that the self-review portfolio tended to have been prepared by professional staff in universities but the panel wishing to meet with academic staff increased the workload for universities.*
- *Lack of clarity or misleading titles provided for interviews sessions meaning that the most appropriate people were not always asked questions, from the perspective of the university.*
- *Lack of anticipated provision of a list of indicative topics that panel members wished to explore. This would have assisted the university in ensuring the most appropriate people were available to meet with the panel.*
- *It would have been helpful to have further discussion between the university and the panel to resolve misunderstandings that could occupy a great deal of panel time.*
- *Interviews requested questions in advance and sought further information about why they had been chosen.*
- *Conversely, another university commented that the balance of interviewees specified by the panel and those selected by the university was appropriate; and indeed this was desirable to mitigate against any perception that universities might select only 'positive' interviewees. AQA needs to continue to ensure that a sufficiently broad range of staff (and students) are interviewed.*
- *Timing issues made it challenging for the university to finalise the schedule of interviews for the site visit.*
- *A query as to whether the emphasis of being on campus was justified.*
- *Interviewees did not receive any guidance from AQA directly; rather this was provided by the university.*
- *The mix of some interviewees being selected by the University and some by the Panel was appropriate.*

The concern around fragmentation was also evident in comments regarding how groups to meet with panels were constructed. As a meeting between the panel and a group of interviewees could cover multiple guideline statements, universities felt that it may have been difficult to maintain coherence in these meetings.

Panel members' comments on the appropriateness of people in session and questions, other than yes or no, were:

- *Not always. I thought perhaps the University could have engaged more actively in shaping the sessions so as to provide access to the right people and avoid repeat appearances. The number of students in the relevant session was disappointing.*
- *Yes, although there were one or two people whom it would have been appropriate to listen to but they were not available.*
- *Sometimes the short interview time was a mismatch with the number of attendees.*
- *Some of the "lower" level groups could be given more time as they generally know what actually occurs.*
- *Mostly but not always, but then how could it be otherwise?*
- *Not always, but I'm not sure this was an AQA or panel fault.*
- *On the whole but some difficulties e.g. only student leaders selected.*
- *The gap was speaking to students and staff, as well as the managers, at the other sites, particularly xxx, given the importance of xxx.*
- *There were some problems at xx, with [vacancies and absences]*
- *A number of people were not available*

The last two comments above indicate a particular situation for an audit. The University has commented that change is an ongoing reality for universities and any inference that major change should be avoided around the time of an audit would not be appropriate.

Panel members commented, other than yes or no, on whether questions were appropriate for the people in sessions as follows:

- *It varied, depending on how disciplined the panel was.*
- *The method employed to settle the questions was thorough and appropriate.*
- *Mostly. Where I felt there weren't it was because the process was too rushed and there was not enough time to gather thoughts between sessions.*
- *Quite difficult to achieve but I thought it worked*
- *Mostly right and sorted out well by the Chair at the first meeting.*
- *Yes, although sometimes I felt the process was a bit orchestrated and prevented illuminating follow-through, accepting that there is a time constraint of course.*
- *... that is the panel's responsibility and given all the information and assistance available, there is no reason not to get this reasonably right.*
- *yes the preparation of verbatim questions very helpful here.*
- *Very well put together by the Chair and [the Director].*

These comments introduce the importance of the role of the chair, panel dynamics and other logistical issues including timing. These issues will be considered later in this paper.

Additionally, panel members commented on whether the interviews were able to cover all of the issues of interest as follows:

- *Time management and the need to give every interviewee a chance to speak meant that some issues got squeezed.*

- *No significant outstanding issues.*
- *On the whole, I felt that we gained as much from the interviews as was realistically possible. We were talking generally to the right people and they appeared to be reasonably frank and forthcoming in their responses.*
- *Some issues did not get covered adequately, especially if they emerged later in the process.*
- *I think we covered them. My concern as above is that I felt we had to take too much on trust - due to lack of time. It would have been nice if we had been able to be more critical of some of the University's claims.*
- *No, but that probably isn't achievable. It was pretty good overall.*
- *There were questions left unanswered.*
- *I don't think anything substantial missed.*
- *I thought the coverage was excellent. The weakest aspect was the interaction/presentation re xxx.*

Lessons for Cycle 6: Consider the processes through which a panel reviews the self-review and whether the current configuration of panel meeting times is still most appropriate.

Give further consideration to how interview sessions are constructed.

Questions regarding composition of interviewee groups and whether groups or individuals were the most appropriate to answer particular questions were considered in the Cycle 6 Discussion paper, where it was suggested that the retention of the existing audit methodology may have limited the potential for panel members to “reach conclusions on (a majority of) guideline statements and therefore focus site visits on [those] that needed further attention” (Matear, 2016a, p6).

One of the components of Cycle 6 is that panel members will have a longer first meeting, with the objective of being able to reach conclusions on a number of guideline statements and need less, but more targeted, time at the university and need to meet with fewer individuals. An option is to consider that three types of interview sessions may be needed in Cycle 6:

1. Strategic framing interviews, typically with the Vice-Chancellor and senior management, to allow the panel to appreciate the strategic context and priorities of the university and how these have shaped their approach to academic audit.
2. Triangulation/validation questions to allow the panel to confirm that the self-review portfolio is a fair reflection of the reality of the university. These would include interviews with academic staff (new, established, professorial), students (undergraduate, postgraduate, residential, distance), heads of department, student support professional staff including learning support and possibly others.
3. Specific, probe, interviews where the panel has insufficient evidence to form a conclusion or has questions. The topics for these interviews should be able to be provided in advance and the university would determine the most appropriate people for the panel to meet with.

Scope needs to be left in the schedule of site visit interviews for emergent issues. If these are significant, it may be that a supplementary visit would be required. This would not be the intent of any change to the audit processes for Cycle 6, which will continue to draw on a mature, constructive and transparent relationship between the university and the panel.

While most panel members who responded indicated that they did have sufficient time between interviews to debrief and prepare, a number felt that they did not. This is a matter which requires attention in developing the processes associated with the site visit(s) and interview schedule(s) for Cycle 6.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Consider how the overall audit process could allow site visits to be more targeted.

Ensure that site visit schedules allow adequate panel time for debrief and reflection sessions.

Universities were asked for feedback on the conduct of the audit panel during the site visit. They commented that:

- *Panel members were polite and professional and asked informed, insightful questions.*
- *... several members of staff felt that one member of the panel was unnecessarily interrogative, and seemed to divert the line of questioning to pursue what seemed to be minor points; or points that were not particularly relevant for the University.*
- *There appeared to be some reluctance on the part of panel members to engage with the material provided online, or through web-links.*
- *Interviewees felt that the audit team were very respectful and open.*
- *We acknowledge and appreciated the respectful interaction of the Panel with the University community. We received consistent feedback from staff and students that they had been treated with courtesy, consideration and genuine interest in what they had to say. Thank you.*
- *We did not hear any comments that suggested the interviewees were anything other than satisfied with their interview. The panel's interaction with the [university] organisers was respectful and requests made in a friendly but professional manner.*
- *It was not always clear why the Panel asked certain questions. Some clarification may have assisted them to develop a richer picture.*
- *The audit panel were very impressive. Interviewees were treated well and our contributions were noted and commented on.*
- *This was all fine.*
- *[An interviewee] felt comfortable being able to speak with members of the panel.*

Lessons for Cycle 6: Auditor training should continue to emphasise the importance of best practice in interviewing.

Universities were also asked whether they received sufficient support from AQA during the site visit. Their responses were that they had; although one university suggested that the question should be phrased the other way round and ask whether the panel received sufficient support throughout the site visit? The support that universities provide in ensuring a smooth and constructive site visit (and overall audit process) is acknowledged in audit reports.

In addition to commenting on the conduct of the panel during the site visit, universities also provided valuable comment on the composition of the audit panel. This feedback stressed the value of having experienced auditors and auditors that are appropriate for the particular university being audited,

including, potentially, endeavouring to appoint auditors from comparable types of university that the university being audited seeks to benchmark itself against.

Other comments from universities on the site visit processes were:

- *Having the site visit outside of term time was a challenge Will avoid this in future.*
- *Earlier notification of the site visit programme (at least 6 weeks) ... would assist in organisation.*
- *Disruption to staff arising from changes in schedules.*
- *Puzzlement about a suggestion that 'incoming' and 'outgoing' interviewees should be kept apart.*
- *The value of having appropriate space for both the Panel and groups waiting to be interviewed.*
- *Effectiveness of use of video-conferencing.*
- *Value to staff of different perspectives across their own university.*
- *Value of being able to include, and make feel included, different parts of a university.*

Most of these points are matters that are already covered in Handbooks and audit processes, but for which there would appear to be merit in reinforcing, or possibly presenting in other ways. There could be value, for example, in developing a 'practical tips' guide that could be used more widely across a university.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Consider other formats for presenting audit guidance material.

Exit meeting and report

In Cycle 5, feedback to a university on the Panel's findings occurred in three phases:

- i. An exit meeting with the Vice-Chancellor (and others as invited by the Vice-Chancellor) at which the chair of the panel provides a verbal summary of the Panel's findings.
- ii. A follow-up letter from the chair of the panel to the Vice-Chancellor sent two-three days after the conclusion of the site visit.
- iii. The audit report for the university.

Both the exit meeting and the letter outline preliminary findings only and do not specifically identify commendations, affirmations and recommendations as a panel will deliberate further on these as it develops its report.

Panel perspectives on the development of the audit report are considered below. Universities were also asked:

- Was it clear that the exit meeting constituted an 'interim' report?
- Whether the follow-up letter to the Vice-Chancellor immediately after the site visit was useful, or unnecessary?

In terms of the exit visit, universities commented that:

- *They had no particular concerns.*
- *Overall fine, but the university was expecting an outline of the areas of commendations and recommendations.*
- *The messages communicated by the Chair were clear and representative of the report.*

- *The meeting was useful but could be improved by being more structured and more formal. Perhaps a written summary could be provided.*

One university commented that an overarching issue which the University felt it had articulated clearly to the Panel at the outset of the visit had not been addressed as it considered had been agreed.

With respect to the provision of a written summary it is suggested that, as panels give careful thought to the wording in audit reports, it may be too early in the process to provide a written summary – even if its interim status is agreed. To some extent, this is the role of the follow-up letter to the Vice-Chancellor.

Universities commented, other than indicating that the letter was useful, on these letters as follows:

- *Very much so.*
- *Useful confirmation of what was reported in the exit meeting.*
- *... necessary as it provided an indication of when we could expect the report.*
- *Useful although strictly necessary as the University had taken good notes at the exit meeting.*
- *Not particularly useful, but it was a courtesy.*
- *While appreciated, is not really necessary.*

Lessons for Cycle 6: Current feedback processes in terms of communicating a panel's findings to a university are appropriate.

The audit report and response to recommendations

Universities were asked whether they considered the final audit report to be robust, fair and useful. Those universities that responded did so in the affirmative, while also noting:

- *[universities] have an opportunity to comment on the draft report with respect to matters of fact, or sensitive matters or information.*
- *That the university's own self-review report is also (and potentially more) valuable.*
- *That the report is useful in that it in general terms it agreed with the areas identified in the self-review report that the University needed to improve.*

Perhaps inevitably, some university feedback also raised queries about specific recommendations or conclusions reached by audit panels, or the phrasing/wording of recommendations. Comments were:

- *... we felt that the language of the recommendation was unclear or imprecise, and no further definition or clarification was provided. It is difficult to obtain institutional buy-in, or to implement a recommendation if it is not fully understood.*
- *... the preamble to a recommendation did not seem to justify the recommendation, or to provide enough evidence to elevate what might have been a concern of the panel to the status of a recommendation. Moreover, the language of Recommendation xx is unclear.*
- *... would argue in the case of several recommendations (...) that the panel has moved too far towards prescription (i.e. that the recommendations instruct the University exactly how to address a matter, not that it needs to be addressed).*
- *The University disagrees with the fairness of a couple of statements.*

While relatively few matters in an audit report are likely to come as a ‘surprise’ to a university, particularly when it has undertaken an authentic self-review process, audit panels need to have scope and support to comment on matters they consider relevant to the audit and the academic quality of the university.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Continue to be explicit about how the panel has reached a conclusion and to reinforce the independence of the audit panel and audit process.

In commenting on the feasibility of addressing recommendations within a five-year timeframe, university comment included:

- *That the timing of being asked for feedback meant that it was a little early for the University to have been able to assess this fully as some of the recommendations are quite long term in nature.*
- *Progress of specific recommendations may be a little slower – due to the need to engage with partner universities.*
- *Progress on most recommendations is already underway.*
- *A project consisting of working parties has been established. This response also set out the progress reporting framework.*
- *Where addressing a recommendation requires culture and progress change, progress may also be slower across a large, complex, university.*

Universities’ progress on addressing recommendations will be considered further in the third paper in this series which will draw on the one-year follow-up reports.

Panel Processes

There are a number of panel processes that occur prior to and following the site visit. Feedback is sought on aspects of the process in the context of whether they assisted panel members in conducting a satisfactory audit. These are summarised in Table 3 and will be examined in further work with panel members. Not all panel members responded to all questions.

Table 3 Panel processes

	Yes/positive	No/negative	Mixed/equivocal
Email interactions between panel members	13	1	3
Guidance and timelines provided by AQA	14	--	2
The auditor handbook	14	--	2
The first face-to-face panel meeting	12	--	4
Allocation of a lead responsibility – to an individual	14	1	1
Allocation of lead responsibilities - generally	13	1	1
Provision of verbatim notes for site visit interviews	7	3	2
Provision of iterations of the audit report	13	--	2

Mixed or equivocal comments regarding the first face-to-face panel meeting agreed that it was valuable, but that:

- *It could have been better structured and time managed more efficiently or that more time may have been required.*
- *That non-New Zealand auditors should have been included. Practice varied over the Cycle 5 audits and in some cases Non-NZ panel members did skype or teleconference into the meeting. One (Australian) panel member who skyped into the meeting indicated they thought this had worked well and they would recommend the practice.*

The allocation of lead responsibilities among panel members was generally seen as positive, although caveats were raised about also needing to maintain coherence and all panel members retaining overall responsibility for the audit.

Not all panel members answered the question regarding the provision of verbatim notes from the site visit interviews. A number of panel members found them useful, or although they did not use them themselves, could see how they could be useful.

The drafting of an audit report is an iterative process and a number of iterations of the draft report are made available to panel members. The use of track changes is encouraged and panel members may make their revisions available to the whole panel. This can result in multiple drafts being in circulation at the same time. Feedback on this question indicates that panel members found the Cycle 5 approach to be appropriate and effective. Mixed or equivocal responses indicated their view was that finalising the report was the panel chair's responsibility, working with the audit director.

Panel members were also asked to provide feedback on:

- How the panel worked as a team,
- The role of the chair, and
- Activities that should be a focus of targeted training for future auditors.

Verbatim responses are not included here as they tended to be quite specific to the individual experiences. However, the responses indicated that the panel members felt that panels were well designed, had complementary and appropriate mixes of capability and experience. Suggestions for ensuring that panels worked well included:

- *The need for international auditors to be well-briefed on the New Zealand context.*
- *The importance of less formal components, such as dinners, in building relationships between panel members.*

Points made by panels regarding the role of the chair (rather than the perceived performance of specific chairs) included:

- *The need for clarity regarding the role of the chair – are they responsible for time management, panel self-discipline, panel dynamics; and not necessarily 'lead questioner' on particular topics.*
- *Keeping the panel focused and calm.*
- *Whether the chair should be a New Zealand panel member or an international panel member, given the size of the New Zealand system.*
- *The need for the chair to understand how universities run.*
- *Importance of sector knowledge.*
- *Valuing and respecting the contribution of panel members.*

This feedback provides direction for further development of the role of the panel chair for Cycle 6 Academic audits. One option is to consider specific ‘training’ for panel chairs, as well as attributes which are important in making recommendations for the appointment of panel chairs.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Pay particular attention to the attributes of and support for chairs of panels.

Topics for auditor training

Panel members also provided comment on activities that should be a focus of targeted training for auditors as follows:

- *... the express objective of getting auditors to leave behind the fact that they come from another university and institution (and have some home-grown ideas of how things should be done).*
- *Role playing questions and answers.*
- *Evaluation of the self-review report.*
- *How to go about asking questions of those who appear before the panel.*
- *The panel process – questioning – really basic stuff!*
- *... keen to see further training on what is robust evidence and also on how /whether the “outcomes” are impacted by the internal system /process ... we have a much stronger “outcome” focus –for tertiary education internationally –how do we assess whether the internal policies/systems/processes –support improved outcomes for learners etc?*
- *Training should always be realistic, using past audits and panels as examples (of both good and bad practice). Also use those who have performed well in past audits - as trainers.*
- *Retain it as process-oriented rather than information-oriented, with the focus on learning and reflecting by doing and watching. The February day was great.*
- *Sticking to the point; clarity of questions; stressing the fact that a report has to come out of the process and there have to be some recommendations*
- *I think a series of exercises that use actual (or slightly modified) excerpts from self-review documents with some actual documents (e.g. statutes or policies) relevant to the self-review extract, and some comments (apocryphal or real) from those interviewed about the excerpt with the training focusing on what the panel should ask or do next. In other words, training in how to triangulate information to decide whether or not the self-review conclusion can be supported or queried.*
- *Ensure they focus on evidence.*
- *The important thing is some training; however, it’s never going to make sufficient sense till in the saddle.*
- *We had a great team, which is not always the case. I think there needs to be a stronger approach to ensuring that panels work cohesively and how important this is to achieving the best outcomes.*
- *Better understanding the role of guideline statements, reflecting on whether the university “do or undertake” these activities and processes reflected in the guideline statements, and how the CARS fits into this “assessment” i.e. drawing conclusions.*
- *I think collaborative provision is not very well understood by auditors, since partnerships between universities and the non-university sector are not common in New Zealand. ... further training to distinguish the different types of collaboration that can occur may be helpful if NZ universities continue to expand their interests in this area.*

Lessons for Cycle 6: Auditor training should consider the guidance from experienced panel members and include:

- The role, treatment and evaluation of evidence and how outcomes are considered.
- Specific issues where New Zealand universities are developing initiatives. The example of collaborative provision was provided in feedback; however, Cycle 6 may need to consider other forms of provision or developments.
- Questioning and interview techniques and methods.
- Panel dynamics.
- The need to reach conclusions and make commendations, affirmations or recommendations.

Auditor training should be delivered using 'real' examples or case studies and by those who are recognised as being good practitioners.

Given the time period between Cycle 5 and Cycle 6 Audits, the recruitment and training of auditors will require specific attention. Cycle 5 drew on the expertise and contribution of 35 auditors and particular effort was made in the latter part of the cycle to introduce and develop new auditors. Their experience, as well as that of longer established auditors, will be valuable in developing resources and training sessions for Cycle 6 auditors.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Draw on the experienced auditors in refreshing the AQA Register of Auditors and Reviewers.

Overall comments on Audit Processes

Universities and panel members were also asked whether they had any further feedback on the audit process overall.

Panel members commented as follows:

- *I think it is a valuable process and it is one which I enjoy.*
- *This audit was a very positive experience for me.*
- *Overall I thought it was of a very high standard.*
- *Overall a very enjoyable experience –very well managed, a good panel who worked very well together –and which had a good grasp of all dimensions of the audit framework.*
- *Can we avoid winter in future?*
- *Care has to be taken in depending too much on overseas auditors, since they inevitably speak from out of their systems which may differ considerably from the NZ system. There is definitely a place for them, but they should never be allowed to dominate discussion or conclusions reached.*
- *Within the limits that circumscribe current audit practice, I think it works well. But I have two broader reflections.*
 - *First, I don't think it is healthy to try to 'know' an institution by recourse to text, interviews and processes alone. This is why I asked for a campus tour, which in the xxx case did not work. It could have worked well however if the audit on campus was less intense, and we could wander (outside) or be shown a small number of things (inside)*

each day. There is value in this in two senses at least: some people think visually as much as in texts. And second, much of what audits are about are facilities and contexts, which are as easily seen to understand as described in words.

- *Second, panels seem pretty old to me: at the training day I was beginning to wonder if academic audit is a pastime for the newly retired VC/DVC. Whilst there are obvious advantages to having some senior people, the process might benefit from younger auditors too. Different perspective; less of an age gap with interviewees etc. The auditors from outside the academic sector do seem to be younger anyway.*
- *It was a stimulating and enjoyable experience.*
- *A lot of work, but I don't need to tell you this. On the other hand, AQA were excellent at helping to minimise this.*
- *No, it was a very good experience.*
- *Nothing to add.*
- *I do reflect on how the process could be simplified and the time input reduced. Not easy to do with the broad scope of Cycle 5, unless you treat Activity Theme 7 differently.*
- *No, suitable and robust process overall.*
- *I was very happy to take part and thank AQA for the chance to contribute to its important work.*
- *Audit process was a very positive experience for me in working on an audit panel despite the difficulty in unravelling how the University actually undertook its quality assurance processes.*

Additionally, panel members were asked whether they considered there were aspects of the audit process which AQA did particularly well and which need to be protected or reinforced and whether there were aspects of the audit processes that should be improved. In terms of those aspects of the audit process which should be protected or reinforced, panel members commented as follows:

- *I feel strongly that audit should continue to be at whole-of-institution level. I thought the process of writing the report worked particularly well, with agency drafting and auditor comment.*
- *The audit was very well managed in terms of time and pace.*
- *I think the whole process is now well honed and should be maintained largely as it is. The process of seeking feedback like this in respect of every audit will lead to further constructive improvements, but I do not think that there is a need for major change.*
- *AQA staff very knowledgeable and open, and helpful.*
- *Very good administrative and expert support. Considerable attention is paid to getting consistency across audits. Panel is well supported in every way. Considerable efforts to ensure that the panel is well informed before the audit itself. Very good writing of the draft and then final report. This makes huge difference to panel members and to quality of the final report.*
- *I am comfortable with the overall process, which is robust, objective and has a way of discerning the truth.*
- *Preliminary meeting of panel and interview/site visit.*
- *The audit was taken seriously by everyone we met.*
- *Based on the one AQA audit process I have been involved with as an auditor, I considered the AQA process was well balanced.*

- *The training, documentation, self-review process and the onsite opportunities to drill down. What is worth seeking to protect is that 'audit' (not a term I particularly like) stays as a collegially-discharged responsibility of the sector and is not corporatised like all else.*
- *I am not familiar with international audit processes so cannot really say. I think the documentation is good.*
- *It's all pretty impressive really. I think Cycle 5 is just right for a "mature" audit process such as AQA's.*
- *Producing a solid pre-report while the panel is still together, so that any disagreements can be ironed out and the overall focus can be agreed.*
- *Excellent communication and documentations, keeping in touch and sharing perceptions and testing these out.*
- *The process of peer review audit within the sector is what needs to be retained. I think the process is now pretty good, although this does depend to an extent on the institution, chair and panel.*

Panel members suggested that the following aspects of the audit process should be improved:

- *Less food.*
- *I wonder whether universities are able to be better encouraged to produce the quality of self-review report that will both be most helpful to the institution itself and the panel. Preparation of the report should be a very helpful experience for the institution as it manages itself into the future.*
- *Some new blood in the panels? NZ is a small system. Some benchmarking with other systems e.g. Hong Kong?*
- *These are not improvements but simply comments. Panels should insist on coming to whatever conclusions they think are merited regardless of what the University thinks, as long as their thoughts are well grounded in evidence. This applies particularly to following up on previous recommendations, even when the University rejected one or more of them in a previous audit.*
- *Universities do their best to make the outcome of audits look good from their angle. Consequently, enormous care is required in how the Executive Summary is written. Good as well as bad points should be very obvious to someone reading the Summary, on the assumption that some will read this and nothing else.*
- *I would prefer four days and more time to reflect. And time to do something in the evenings other than rush to dinner and then to bed in order to be up in time to get the bus to restart at 0830!*
- *I think the truncated time for the xxx audit was unfortunate.*
- *The timing issue outlined above was a problem but was overcome.*
- *Better engagement and openness by the University being audited. For the AQA process itself, process was fine.*
- *I think it might be easier to schedule call backs right at the start and then cancel if they were unnecessary, rather than seeking to identify call backs partway through the process. One can always add to the list if necessary, but it would not be hard to predict the people that one would want to ask about issues that others have raised (or not known about) after the first appearance.*
- *Given the inevitable constraints, I am fairly happy with the whole process and the panel members were excellent.*

Panels were also asked whether they felt adequately supported by AQA for the audit process overall. Their responses were consistently affirmative that they felt well supported, with the only question whether AQA had plans in place in case one of the AQA staff members became ill or otherwise unavailable. AQA does have contingency plans in place. However, these should be reviewed and re-assessed frequently and prior to each audit.

Lessons for Cycle 6: Ensure that AQA manages the risk of one of its staff being unable to undertake an audit at short notice.

Universities were also asked whether they had any other comments regarding any aspect of the audit process. Responses included comment on:

- *The need to consider the context of other significant processes on how a university responds to recommendations. This was particularly the case for Canterbury-based universities.*
- *The effectiveness and usefulness of student submissions to the Panel, with comments including the inability of the university to be able to gauge this and universities considering that student survey results were more representative.*
- *Whether the timeframe for seeking feedback on a university's experience of audit is too soon, as a university had not had time to debrief.*
- *The tension that exists between universities being 'expected' to address recommendations and academic audit not being a compliance activity, yet universities being held accountable if they do not address recommendations.*
- *Following from this, whether greater consideration needs to be given to differences in Panel perspectives between audit cycles as the Panel which makes recommendations differs from the panel which assesses whether recommendations have been addressed in the next Cycle.*
- *The importance of understanding that the purpose of audit is to assist the university and that self-reflection is a vital part of any audit and must be undertaken diligently and honestly if the university is to derive the most value from its audit.*

Lessons for Cycle 6: Consider how the student voice can be most effective in academic audit.
Provide further guidance regarding the role of academic audit within the wider quality assurance and accountability frameworks for New Zealand universities.

Conclusions and Implications

Lessons for Cycle 6 have been identified throughout this paper. This section presents conclusions as to the coverage and processes of the Cycle 5 academic audit for New Zealand universities and synthesizes lessons into implications for Cycle 6. Further development and operationalisation of Cycle 6, particularly the academic audit component, should consider both the implications and the more detailed lessons.

The first conclusion to be drawn is that the feedback from both universities and panel members, even considering that it is not as comprehensive as might have been desired, provides a rich and valuable source of advice and guidance for Cycle 6. Although a university/audit level analysis was not considered, the feedback was relatively consistent in the themes and issues identified across universities and audits, with few university or audit-specific issues being identified. Nonetheless, feedback processes could have been more comprehensive. Implications for Cycle 6 are:

- To consider how, when and from what perspectives feedback is sought. This could include explicitly scheduling reflexive sessions (provided these do not detract from the audit process) in the audit timeline and capturing feedback throughout the process, and extending seeking feedback to follow-up and mid-cycle audit processes. University and panel perspectives may be augmented by also including student perspectives.

A second conclusion is that the coverage of the Cycle 5 audit framework was generally appropriate and no major gaps were considered to exist. Specific areas for further consideration have been identified. The implications for Cycle 6 are:

- To ensure that this feedback, together with the comparative analyses of other quality assurance frameworks and the patterns of commendations, affirmations and recommendations, is considered in the refresh of the Cycle 5 framework for use in Cycle 6.

A third conclusion is that overall, the framework and its use were found to be robust in enabling audit panels to provide a fair assessment of university processes. However, there were some aspects of the use of the framework – the extent to which it supports and enables a coherent narrative and that it should not act as a constraint – which have implications for Cycle 6. These are that Cycle 6 should:

- Clarify expectations regarding the provision of a coherent narrative and that the audit framework provides a structure and starting point, but that it should not act as a constraint. Further discussion on how this latter point intersects with perceptions of the scope of the Cycle 6 academic audit may be required. However, if a matter impacts, or has the potential to impact, students' learning, their outcomes or experience, it is likely to be within scope. This is important in terms of both the independence of academic audit and AQA's role in quality assurance.

A series of conclusions can also be drawn with respect to audit processes. Feedback from universities and audit panel members reinforced the importance of the self-review in the audit process and the significance of this as an undertaking for a university. That the self-review received some critical feedback from panel members is not surprising as this is the initial point where an audit panel engages with the audit of a university. Overall, self-review reports did enable panel members to gain a sense of the overall quality of the university's academic processes. However, a further conclusion is that adequacy of evidence and the self-critical treatment of evidence in the self-review reports could have been better.

Site visits remain an important and demanding component of the audit process. The potential for these to be streamlined and focus on aspects of the framework for which a panel seeks further evidence or understanding does not appear to have been realised to the anticipated extent in Cycle 5. This is interconnected with other panel processes including the first panel meeting. The composition of audit panels was raised in different aspects of feedback. The conclusion is that membership of audit panels needs to consider a number of factors including the appropriateness of the audit panel for the university being audited, experience, international perspectives and the currency and age profile of panel members. The conduct and insight of panel members was valued. Other conclusions with respect to audit processes are that the current three-stage feedback to a university on audit findings is appropriate, as are other panel processes.

Implications for Cycle 6 are:

- Pay further attention to the provision and treatment of evidence in self-review reports, noting that evidence is also developed in the site visit.
- Consider a schedule of workshops that assist in preparing universities and panel members for Cycle 6 and include these in the operationalisation timelines for Cycle 6. Topics could include good practice in self-review and expectations regarding evidence.
- Consider the range of ways in which audit guidance and advice is made available.
- Refresh the AQA Register of Auditors and Reviewers and explore opportunities for quality professionals to engage with academic audit outside of their current university.
- Maintain existing good practices with respect to communication of audit findings to universities, other panel processes and auditor training.

Overall comments from panel members reinforce the importance of academic audit and the appropriateness and effectiveness of Cycle 5 processes. They also emphasised the importance of the independence of academic audit.

This paper has presented a comprehensive and detailed review of the process aspects of Cycle 5 Academic Audit, including the coverage of the audit framework. It will inform operationalisation and development work for Cycle 6, particularly the refresh of the audit framework for use in Cycle 6. Importantly, it also contributes to AQA's purpose in advancing New Zealand university education and in particular "applying quality assurance and quality enhancement processes that assist universities in improving student engagement, academic experience and learning outcomes" (AQA, 2013, p1).

Cycle 6 responds to this paper. Specifically, it will (AQA, 2017a):

- Maintain an internationally referenced, cyclical, peer-review model of external quality assurance (component A).
- Maintain a high-trust, enabling, relationship between the universities and AQA that recognises and respects universities' responsibility and accountability for quality as well as AQA's Terms of Reference and independence (component B).
- Maintain the scope of academic audit on teaching, learning, support and outcomes for students (component C).
- Build on and refresh the Cycle 5 academic audit framework (guideline statements) and further emphasise outcomes and the use of evidence and appropriate metrics (component D).
- Include students or recent graduates in audit panels (component H).
- Amend the audit delivery method so that Panels spend more time together initially and that time spent at the university can be more targeted and require meeting with fewer individuals (component I).

Work is underway to operationalise Cycle 6 Academic Audit and the first audit is scheduled for 2021. Further information is available on the AQA website.

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