Thematic notes: Teaching Quality, Development and Excellence

Thematic notes are an occasional series of short notes on topics of interest to New Zealand universities. They may be prompted by analysis of audit reports, developments in other jurisdictions or policy initiatives and, in turn, are intended to prompt further consideration among New Zealand universities.

Cycle 5 Academic Audits of New Zealand universities were conducted by AQA between 2013 and 2016. The first report in the Cycle was published in February 2014 and the final report in December 2016.

Teaching Quality, Teaching Development and Teaching Excellence

The quality of teaching in New Zealand universities is obviously important for a number of stakeholders. Chalmers and Hunt (2016) review the purposes of evaluating teaching quality, sources and evidence and use of that evidence in evaluating university teaching.

This thematic note uses the reports from Cycle 5 academic audit to consider how quality teaching is assured in NZ universities, how universities provide opportunities for staff to develop their teaching practice and how universities recognise teaching capability.

Current situation
Section 6 of the Cycle 5 Academic Audit Framework was concerned with teaching quality. This note focuses on three guideline statements:

6.3   Teaching quality. Universities should use processes for assessing teaching quality and for monitoring and enhancing individual teaching capability of all teaching staff.

6.4   Teaching development. Universities should provide opportunities for staff to develop their teaching practice, including application of contemporary pedagogical research, use of learning management systems and use of new technologies.

6.6   Teaching recognition. Universities' reward processes (promotion; special awards) should recognise teaching capability.

The pattern of commendations, affirmations and recommendations across these guideline statements is summarised below. The full text of audit panel comment on these guideline statements can be found in the Cycle 5 academic audit reports (available on the AQA website). This note also draws on comments on teaching quality made in university annual reports.

GS	AU	AUT	WU	MU	VUW	UC	LU	OU
6.3	A5		R10	R12		R10, R11, R12		C10, A5
6.4	A6	A3, R6	R11	R13, R14	C11	A5, R13		C11
6.6			C3	C4				C12

6.3   Teaching quality

The primary purpose of evaluating teaching quality is to improve it. Evaluation of teaching is also used to support career development and progression processes (Chalmers and Hunt, 2016). A third purpose is to provide confidence and accountability in the use of both public money and student fees.

All New Zealand universities have processes in place for assessing teaching quality. These processes are located within wider frameworks that set out expectations, including the frequency with which feedback on teaching should be assessed and the types of evidence that can be used (for example student evaluations of teaching, peer review of teaching). Although criteria may be refined for individual university contexts, they draw on a well-established body of scholarly evidence of what constitutes good teaching (see, for example Chalmers et al., 2014, 2015, cited in Chalmers and Hunt (2016)).

Teaching quality processes are also connected to other processes such as professional development and promotion processes. For staff, promotion policies set out the requirements for promotion to levels of positions. Some differentiate expectations by broad discipline area, for example humanities and sciences, recognising that different norms may exist between discipline areas. Promotions documents also set out the range of teaching activities that may be considered. This can include course design, tutorials, large class lecturing, field work, and supervision. These documents also set out the types of evidence that can be used in demonstrating the 'standard' of teaching that is required for promotion. The Cycle 5 audit panel for The University of Auckland affirmed the University's "model for evaluating teaching whereby triangulation is possible from attention to self-reflection, peer assessment and student evaluation" (A5).

Professional development and other review and monitoring processes are also important. The Cycle 5 Audit Panel for the University of Otago commended "the University for its staff review processes, including the biennial review of Professorial and Associate Professorial staff and for its promotion of, and support for, a culture of teaching" (C10). This process ensures that all staff, whether they are applying for promotion or not, have their teaching reviewed. The report of the Cycle 5 Audit of AUT notes that all staff are expected to maintain an individual development plan which is to be reviewed at least annually.

Criteria of what constitutes good teaching are clearly set out (particularly in promotion and other HR policies and procedures). They reflect the diversity of teaching activities that academics undertake and most policies and other commentators emphasis the value of having multiple sources of evidence. In a recent review, Chalmers and Hunt (2016) set out four sources of evidence for evaluations of teaching:

1. Input from students
2. Peers and colleagues
3. Student achievement

4. Self-assessment.

Each of the four sources of evidence is themselves multifaceted.

Challenges do exist in reporting on teaching quality. The multi-source, holistic assessments of individual teachers used for teaching improvement and progress purposes are robust, but are context specific and do not lend themselves to ease of reporting. However, universities could produce (from existing processes):

- Standards of teaching expected at different career levels (promotion criteria and/or career level expectations).
- Processes for ensuring these standards are achieved and maintained (staff review requirements and responsibilities).
- Reports of outcomes of these processes, which could include proportions of staff that the university has assessed and for which it is confident that standards have been achieved or maintained.

Another way of simplifying holistic assessments would be to make use of professional accreditation frameworks. An indicator such as the number (or %) of staff that have gained professional registration could both take account of the context of teaching and provide a "simple" measure of teaching quality. There would be other benefits including drawing on an assessment framework that is derived from scholarly practice and having access to 'trained' and experienced peer reviewers.

More simple measures, which seem to be preferred for accountability purposes and reporting, tend to be dominated by a few sources of evidence (student evaluations of teaching, student perceptions of quality, and fairly crude indicators of student achievement). In themselves, the student feedback indicators are valuable, but reporting at programme or institution level lacks context which limits the validity of the data and can be misleading. Some universities however, for example AUT, have developed 'scorecards' which use survey data on teaching and courses at the individual course or unit level and can be used by staff to reflect on their own teaching practice.

The above 'measures' use the teacher as the unit of analysis. This is important, but not all courses are taught by a single teacher. Universities can (and do) also produce evidence of the quality of teaching in courses and programmes. However, this tends to be more reliant on single sources of evidence, predominantly student feedback.

At course and programme levels, universities do compile aggregate reports of student perceptions of quality of teaching and student achievement. These tend to be either student evaluations of teaching or part of comprehensive student or graduate surveys. They are single sources of evidence, in contrast to promotions and professional accreditation processes that make use of multiple sources and that take more account of contextual information. Reporting on teaching quality in annual reports (statements of service performance) varies across universities.

Less information seems to be available about aggregate outcomes of promotion and review processes that utilise multiple sources and account for context with respect to teaching.

Whether evaluation of teaching quality is based on a staff member or a course, shortfalls or not meeting expectations of teaching quality are also considered by audit panels. There are two aspects to this: (1) ensuring that all teaching is evaluated on a regular basis and (2) understanding how shortfalls are addressed. For most universities, Panels were confident that universities had central

oversight over processes for ensuring that teaching quality was monitored and that any concerns or shortfalls were addressed. Panels did however make recommendations for three universities to strengthen institutional oversight. Panels also commented on universities processes and responsibilities for addressing shortfalls or failures to demonstrate expected standards. In some cases it made comments to make information better available to Deans or Heads of Department with staff management responsibilities.

From the comments made by Audit Panels, it is evident that New Zealand universities all utilise evaluations of teaching for development and progression purposes, as well as monitoring and management of risk.

6.4   Teaching development
Three universities in the Cycle 5 academic audit received a recommendation with respect to teaching development. Recommendations can be characterised as:
- Assessing professional development needs,
- Aligning professional development with strategic initiatives,
- Supporting and encouraging uptake of professional development opportunities, including ensuring access to professional development,
- Professional development that addresses new teaching technologies.

In the text in audits reports, panels commented on:
- How teaching development was aligned with other (typically broader) capability development frameworks within universities and how it was guided by strategic initiatives.
- How support for teaching development was provided, with most universities having a central or focal unit charged with providing support.   Some tension and need for balance exists between centrally located units and local and devolved support. Where panels considered that the level of devolution posed a challenge to either institutional commitment to teaching quality and development, or the ability to quality assure teaching development initiatives, they commented to that effect. Panels also commented on the position of units with the organisational structure of a university, where they considered the current position might impede the unit's ability to work effectively across a university.
- Variation among those units responsible for teaching development, with some having an academic role and expected to conduct research or provide policy advice.
- The range of teaching development services and support available (qualifications, professional development programmes, seminars, workshops) and the mechanisms available to support them (teaching development grants, fellowships, bursaries, university teaching conferences, peer networks, student mentors).
- A particular emphasis on the use of technology in teaching.
- All universities having some form of 'required' teaching development programme for academic staff new to tertiary teaching and all universities encourage academic staff to undertake formal tertiary teaching qualifications. Two universities are participating in a pilot initiative based on the UK's HEA accreditation model.

6.6   Teaching recognition
No recommendations were made in Cycle 5 with respect to teaching recognition. However, three universities received commendations, reflecting good practices.

The main themes in the audit reports were that:

- Teaching recognition is closely linked to promotion processes, and some audit reports outline the sorts of teaching evidence that would be required in a promotion application.
- A tension still exists between the relative weights given to teaching and research in promotion decisions. Some audit reports do include comment that teaching is given due recognition and that the recognition of teaching has improved.
- Other means of recognition include teaching awards and acknowledgement in university publications. Teaching awards operate at faculty and university level across most universities. Some students' associations also present teaching awards.
- Teaching award recipients are seen as exemplars of good practice and encouraged to share their practice. In one university, recipients on university teaching awards have developed into a source of advice and influence for the university.

Topics for continuing discussion

These following are initial areas for discussion and subject to further consideration and debate:
- Do audit reports and university annual reports provide sufficient public information about the quality of teaching at a university?
- Does the typically close linkage between promotion and professional development processes limit the public reporting of teaching quality?
- What sort(s) of reporting of teaching quality would be useful?
- Should there be a common framework for measuring teaching quality across universities? (See Alderman, 2012, cited in Chalmers and Hunt, 2016.)
- How will the increase in IT systems for collecting data (and automation of data-collection) change the ways is which teaching quality is assessed?
- Have universities developed robust rubrics for peer-evaluation of teaching and evaluating teaching portfolios?
- How should variation with respect to teaching quality within universities be reported. Students not only select whether to study at a particular university, but also what programme or qualification to study. Australia, for example, provides data at the level of the area of study and provides confidence intervals, as well as a national average (see https://www.qilt.edu.au/).
- Some universities are participating in the UK's Higher Education Academy's teaching fellows programme. While this should recognise good teachers, how best can the issue of 'lower quality' teaching be addressed.

Sheelagh Matear
Executive Director, Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities
May, 2017

References

Chalmers, D. and Hunt, L. (2016), "Evaluation of teaching", HERDSA Review of Higher Education, Vol. 3, www.herdsa.org.au/herdsa-review-higher-education-vol-3/25-55