Quality in common: Reflections on findings from NZUAAU academic audits 2000 - 2011

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Abstract: Between 2000 and 2011, the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU) conducted 23 academic audits of New Zealand's eight universities. Nearing the end of its fourth cycle of audit, the NZUAAU has been taking a closer look at some of the issues, successes and challenges characterising New Zealand universities during this period. The paper takes a sector-wide look at the findings of audits, exploring over 700 recommendations, commendations and affirmations made during what has been a period of change and challenge for many New Zealand universities.

The shifting focus of academic audit panels, and of universities themselves, has seen changes in the foci of each audit with increasing attention paid to the role of governance and management structures and communication, to learning technologies and learning spaces, and to institution-wide approaches to quality assurance. Other areas that continue to provide a focus of audit include postgraduate supervision, academic honesty, internationalisation, staff training and development, and the development and support of a research-led teaching environment. Engagement with, and support of, Māori and Pacific students and their communities is a particular emphasis of New Zealand universities and, thus, of New Zealand academic audit.

The paper suggests that an observed decline in the number of recommendations with each cycle of audit reflects a maturing of the university sector's approach to academic quality assurance. The paper concludes with a look ahead to a fifth cycle of academic audit in New Zealand.

Note: This paper draws upon and updates material published in 2011 by the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit ("A thematic overview of institutional audit 2000 – 2010") available from the NZUAAU website: www.nzuaau.ac.nz/SeriesonQuality11 .

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Introduction

The New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU) was established by the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee in 1993 to provide assurance and quality enhancement services which assist universities in excellent student experience and learning outcomes. Between 2000 and 2011, NZUAAU undertook a total of 23 audits resulting in more than 700 recommendations, commendations and affirmations on matters of academic quality.[1]

NZUAAU academic audit panels work within an indicative framework, focusing their attention on areas of particular importance to universities. Audit reports include affirmations, commendations and recommendations made by an independent panel of 4 – 5 academic auditors (including at least one international panel member). The audit report reflects the panel's collective view following consideration of: the self-review portfolio of the institution (based on the university's own strategic objectives and related to the nominated foci of the audit); supporting materials and documentation provided by the university; and interviews and discussions with staff, students and other university stakeholders.

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[1] The audits of seven universities have been completed since the current cycle (Cycle 4) commenced in 2008 and the remaining audit will be completed in 2012.

Overview of broad themes

Because of the change in focus of each of the audit cycles, along with the differing objectives of individual institutions and audit panels, drawing conclusions from an analysis of broad themes is difficult.[2] What does emerge, however, is a picture of the advent and progression of themes common to some or all of the eight universities since 2000.

As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of recommendations and commendations related to management and governance, including strategic planning and internal structure and communication, grew in each audit cycle. This may be attributable to several factors, including a greater focus on university differentiation, an increase in compliance responsibilities, and the complexity of institutional decision-making in a rapidly shifting policy context. As can also be seen, the proportion of recommendations and commendations related to the Treaty of Waitangi, Māori and Pacific staff and students grew during this period. Whether these shifts in emphases occurred on the part of the audit panels, NZUAAU, the universities themselves or a combination of all three is difficult to unpack.

Figure 1: Audit recommendations and commendations by cycle and broad theme, 2000 – 2011[3]
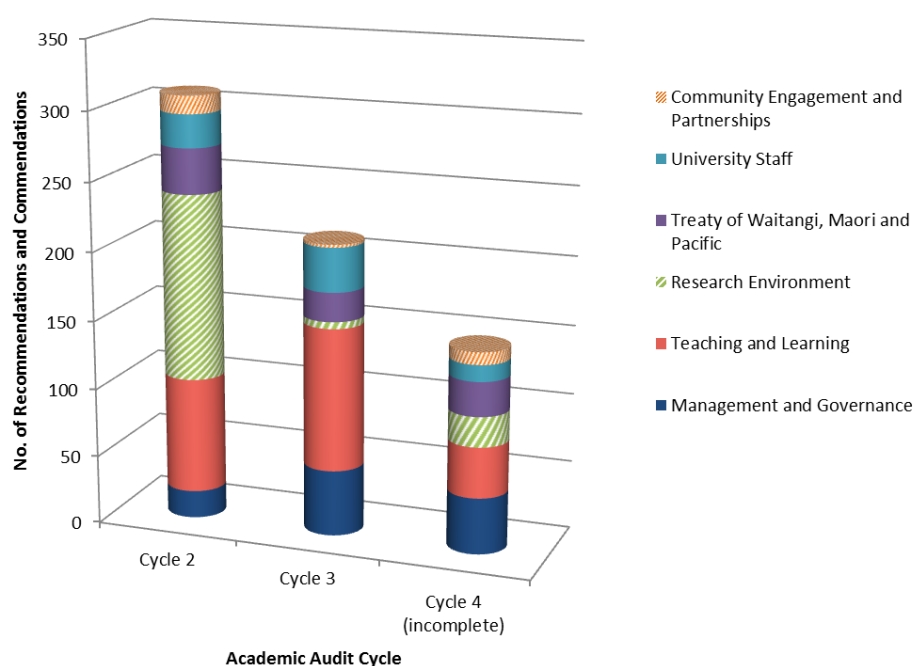

At the same time, as shown in Figure 2, the number of recommendations made by audit panels has been decreasing in each cycle.[4] Since Cycle 2, the areas of focus and level of specifiity of the audit reports have shifted. Universities have also individually responded to recommendations in preceding cycles as well as to changes that have occurred in the external quality environment.

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[2] Figure 1 appears to show a greatly reduced emphasis on university research since Cycle 2 (2000 – 2001). In reality, the chosen topic for the Cycle 2 audits was research and this cycle of audits coincided with preparation for New Zealand's first Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) evaluation of tertiary education research in 2003. In latter cycles, in a desire not to duplicate the quality assessment activities of the PBRF, audit panels confined their comments to consideration of the extent to which the research culture, research environment and research activities enhance teaching and learning and impact on staff responsibilities.

[3] Cycles 2 and 3 include the audits of all 8 New Zealand universities; Cycle 4 includes 7 universities with one university audit remaining for 2012.

[4] While Cycle 4 is incomplete, with one audit remaining the number of recommendations made in Cycle 4 is very unlikely to exceed Cycles 2 or 3.

Figure 2: Academic audit recommendations, commendations and affirmations by cycle, 2000 – 2011
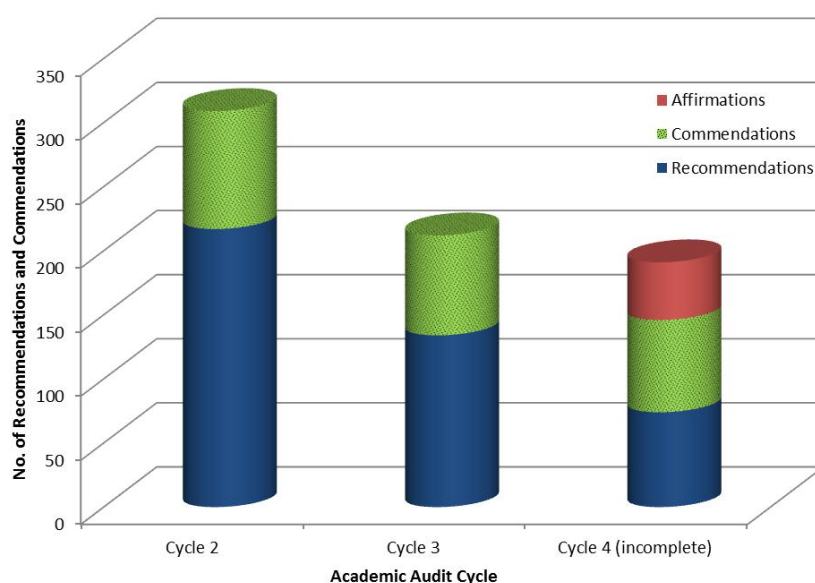
This means that while some areas remain challenging and others will emerge as the external context changes, the role of audit panels in Cycle 4 has been increasingly one of affirming and commending good practice, and fine-tuning the implementation of recommendations previously adopted by the institutions.[5] It is NZUAAU's view that this trend is most likely to be attributable to a general maturing of the universities' quality assurance processes over this time.

Turning now to explore these broad categories of findings in greater depth, the audit reports reveal themes that are likely to be more reflective of university activities and priorities than the development of the audit process *per se*.

Teaching and learning

As shown in Figure 3, evaluation of teaching (including responding to student feedback) was the single most prominent theme of recommendations about teaching and learning made to universities during Cycles 2 - 4. Each university received recommendations relating to the need to improve the way in which they sought feedback from students on the quality of teaching, and on the mechanisms through which they acknowledge and respond to that feedback. In Cycle 4, recommendations have moved to making greater use of information technology in the appraisal of teaching and course quality, and the dissemination of the results of evaluation.

Student support services received a large number of recommendations and commendations over the decade. Across the three Cycles, most institutions were commended on the support services they provided to students, with individual institutions reminded of the particular needs of students with disabilities, students based on satellite campuses, and international students. Audit panels also highlighted the importance of systems designed to identify and support students at risk.

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[5] Affirmations were introduced in Cycle 4.

Figure 3: Teaching and learning recommendations and commendations, 2000 – 2011
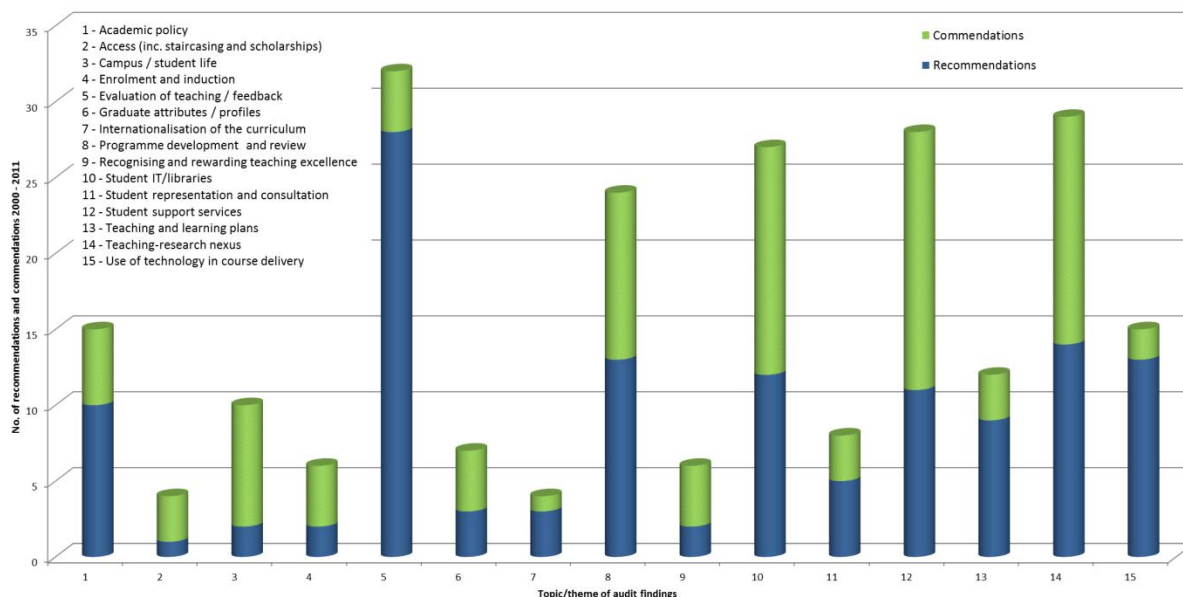
Reflecting significant campus redevelopments by several universities since 2000, a number of institutions received commendations from audit panels for student information technology and library services, learning spaces, and improvements in student services and campus/student life.

Commendations also focused on universities' approaches to programme development and approval, and evidence of the teaching-research nexus. Recognition of the role of stakeholder participation (including students and community groups) was endorsed in some institutions and reinforced as an area for improvement in others. Several areas to emerge included the development of graduate profiles, and greater use of technology in teaching and learning, including on-line delivery of courses.

During Cycle 2 (2000 – 2001), recommendations emerged that universities needed to take a proactive and strategic approach to the development of web-based courses and the integration of information technology into the curriculum. By Cycle 3, there were some commendations for initiatives in the development and implementation of flexible learning and teaching, but the need for adequate training and support for affected staff was being reinforced by several audit panels. Audit reports during this time stressed the need for institution-wide leadership to support pedagogical change. In Cycle 4, institutions have been reminded of the need for adequate investment and of the importance of monitoring the effectiveness of this investment to ensure improved success and outcomes for learners, including students learning from a distance.

Research environment

As shown in Figure 4, audit panel comment on the academic quality of universities' research environment was largely concentrated on postgraduate student supervision and examination, followed by postgraduate student enrolment and support. Universities received many commendations on these topics, but many more recommendations for quality enhancement.

Figure 4: Research Environment recommendations and commendations, 2000 – 2011
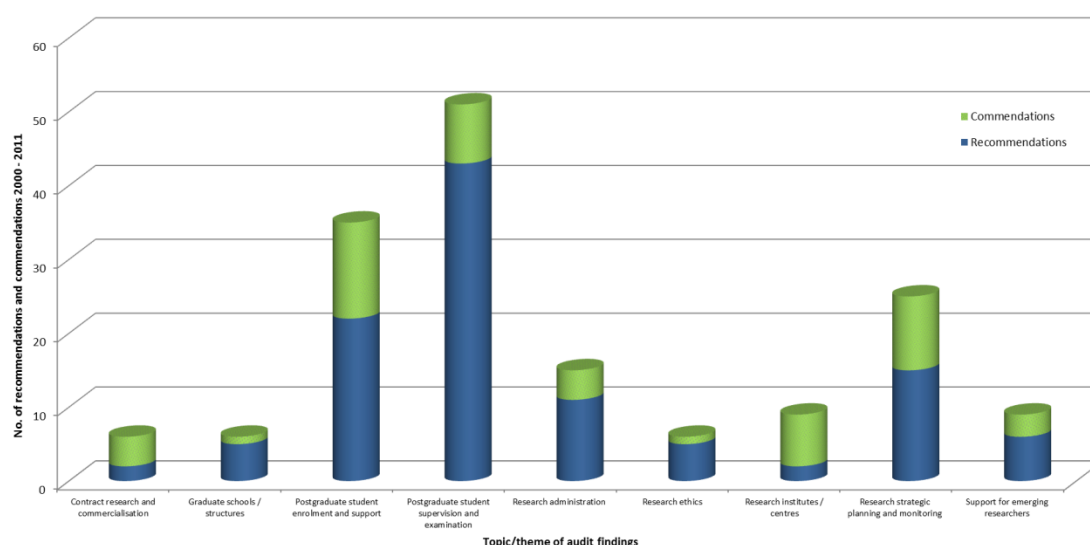
The same challenges observed in Cycle 2 continued into Cycles 3 and 4; namely, the need to develop university-wide standards expected of supervisory arrangements, to ensure adherence with these standards is monitored, and to provide staff and students with the training and resources they require to ensure that the supervisory relationship is supportive of students and their progress. Examples of systematic approaches were commended, along with university initiatives designed to collect and respond to feedback from postgraduate students.

Student handbooks, statements of minimum resources, and the quality of written materials provided to prospective and current postgraduate students dominated recommendations and commendations in Cycle 2. Cycle 4 recommendations and commendations have focused on developing student-centred enrolment and transition processes, along with affirmations of universities' plans to make further improvements in this area while growing postgraduate student numbers.

Management and governance

As shown in Figure 5, the key themes of structure and internal communication, performance indicators, institutional quality assurance frameworks, benchmarking and strategic planning/vision dominated audit panel findings in the area of university management and governance over the past 10 years.

In Cycle 2, recommendations were made to several universities about their structure and internal communication, largely related to clarifying responsibilities across faculties and divisions, enhancing internal communication and ensuring consistency in service and quality for students. By Cycle 3 and into Cycle 4, the focus of recommendations had shifted toward the importance of effective communication between senior management/leadership teams, and their Council, faculties, schools and administrative units.

In Cycle 2, recommendations focused on the need to develop an inclusive strategy that included the input of Council, senior managers and other university staff. By Cycle 3 and 4, audit panels were commending most universities on the consultation and communication that surrounded the development of strategies, and for the clear articulation of their institutional vision.

Figure 5: Management and governance recommendations and commendations, 2000 – 2011
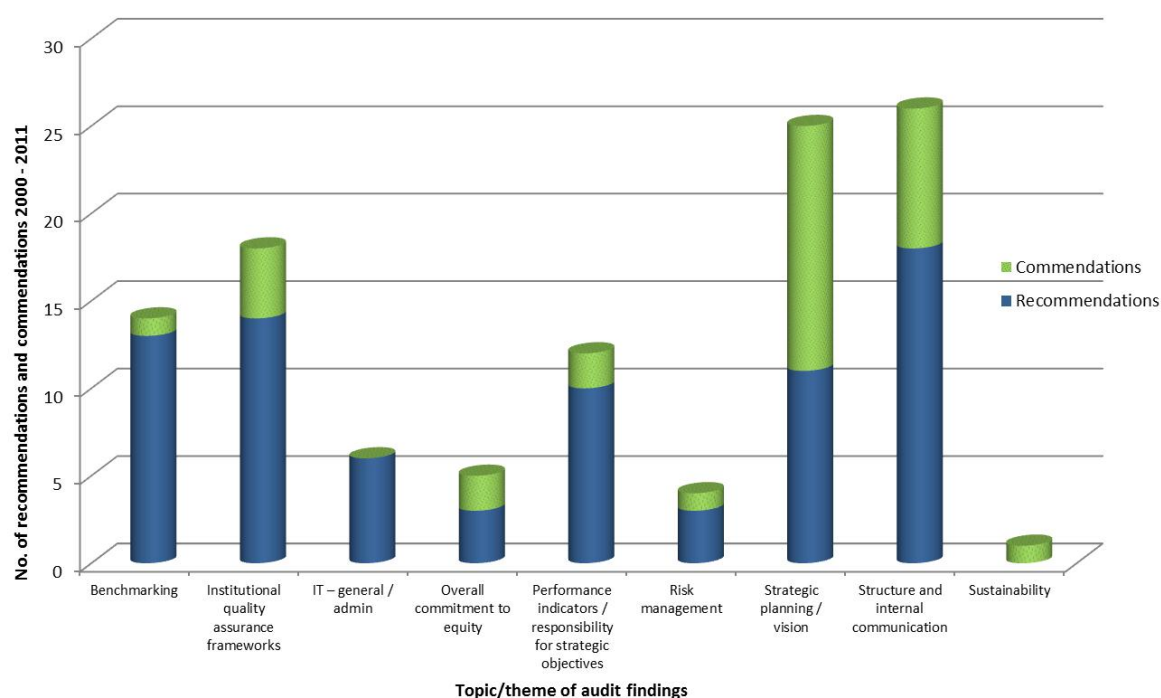
Institutional quality assurance frameworks have been a particular focus of academic audit panels in Cycles 3 and 4, and recommendations suggest universities could do more to meet their stated objectives in this area. While commending examples of good practice, audit panels noted the need for a more systematic framework in almost all universities to enable the monitoring and review of quality in teaching and research, as well as of functional areas including service and support departments. A focus remains on the identification and application of appropriate benchmarks to assist in the enhancement of research-led teaching and learning.

Treaty of Waitangi,[6] Māori and Pacific[7]

In Cycle 2 (2000 – 2001), all New Zealand universities received recommendations related to improving their active commitment to the advancement of Māori students and staff; by Cycle 3 (2002 – 2007) several universities were being commended for their plans and progress. In Cycle 4, most universities have been commended for the visible and practical ways in which their commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi has been embedded and is expressed throughout the university.

For other universities, recommendations in Cycle 4 have highlighted the need for greater institution-wide awareness and commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi. Audit panels have commented on the role of well-defined objectives and effective mechanisms for monitoring to ensure institutions retain a focus on building Māori capability, research and leadership.

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[6] The Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi) is New Zealand's founding document. It was signed in 1840, and is a broad statement of principles on which the British Crown and Māori chiefs reached agreement to found a nation state and build a government in New Zealand. All New Zealand tertiary education institutions are expected to operate consistently with the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and NZUAAU, therefore, specifically identifies the Treaty of Waitangi as a topic for audit. In practice, many university support structures also accommodate Pacific students and staff as well as Māori.

[7] The broad themes of the Treaty of Waitangi, Māori and Pacific have been combined in this analysis because university strategic objectives and activities in these areas could not be easily separated for the purposes of analysis. Several audit panels recommended universities consider these two groups separately in their performance objectives and in the design and delivery of services, and this is now largely the case for New Zealand universities.

Commitment to the advancement of Pacific students and staff is a theme that has emerged over the course of the decade.[8] In Cycle 4, audit panels have reinforced university objectives in this area, highlighting the need for specific targets and planning community-based activities that recognise Pacific peoples as a distinctive stakeholder group.

University staff

University staff – particularly, but not exclusively academic staff – have been the focus of many audit panel findings, and the proportion of recommendations and commendations focusing on staff has remained relatively constant since 2000. The quality and effectiveness of the training and staff development units of universities have received many commendations over the decade. Recommendations for further enhancement have focused on the needs of casual and fixed-term staff and those located on satellite campuses.

In Cycle 3 and, particularly, Cycle 4, a focus of audit panel comment has been the need for leadership and management training and development. Audit panels have also stressed the need for induction processes and courses specifically tailored to the needs of new staff, suggesting these should take into account prior teaching experience, anticipated academic duties, and interactions with students.

Academic staff workload policies and models have received attention throughout all cycles of audit since 2000. Most universities received recommendations during this time, with audit panels particularly keen to see the development of institution-wide guidelines about maximum numbers of postgraduate students per supervisor, administrative demands, and ensuring the Performance-Based Research Fund and the cultural leadership roles undertaken by some staff do not negatively affect the time available for staff to enhance the quality of teaching.

Looking ahead

This analysis suggests a number of issues that are likely to continue to occupy New Zealand universities in their commitment to academic quality, including postgraduate supervisory arrangements, student feedback mechanisms, the support of Māori and Pacific students, and staff workloads. Changes in government policy (including a shift to nationwide voluntary student membership of student unions, and the introduction of ministerial directives on the use of student services fees), could see academic and pastoral support services, and student representation and consultation, feature to a greater extent in future academic audits. Identifying and supporting students at risk is an increasingly high-profile area internationally and audit reports suggest further enhancement could occur in New Zealand universities.

Other changes in emphasis which might be expected include: further development and integration of academic honesty/plagiarism policies into the curriculum and into assessment practices; internationalisation of the curriculum; succession planning; and the on-going task of reconciling employer and alumni input with professional bodies' needs, student expectations and universities' own graduate profiles.[9]

Nearing the end of its fourth cycle of academic audits, NZUAAU has been considering the nature and value of audits undertaken, along with national and international developments in the area of academic quality. The focus of Cycle 5 audits (commencing in 2013) will be on 'teaching and learning and student support'. NZUAAU audit panels will adopt an academic risk management approach in their investigations and audits will include evaluation against a set of expectations (currently under development).

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[8] The term 'Pacific' (ie., Pacific students and staff, and Pacific peoples) has been used throughout this report reflecting the language used in NZUAAU audit reports during the period under review, and as a collective term for all peoples from, or self-identifying with, the Pacific region.
[9] The APQN 2012 conference presentation on this paper may expand on these areas (which are subject to change along with the national and international context of New Zealand universities).