

Report of the 2016 Academic Audit of the University of Otago

Executive Summary

Established in 1869, The University of Otago is the oldest university in New Zealand. Its main campus is in Dunedin with campuses in Christchurch and Wellington focussed on health sciences education and research, and an Invercargill campus that is part of the College of Education. A centre in Auckland provides student information and support for distance students.

In 2015, the University of Otago had a total enrolment of 20,601 students (18,421 EFTS) and 3,803 full-time equivalent staff. The University of Otago's academic offerings span from pre-degree to doctoral level and in 2015 comprised 187 programmes. They include professionally accredited programmes in health sciences and dentistry, commerce, surveying and education. A number of programmes are offered by distance. Approximately 20% of students are postgraduate.

The University was audited by the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) in 2016. The current audit follows the methodology used for all New Zealand universities in the fifth cycle of academic audits. It focuses on teaching and learning and student support, including at postgraduate levels. The AQA audit methodology incorporates a framework of 40 Guideline Statements which articulate the qualities or standards which a contemporary university of good standing internationally might be expected to demonstrate.

Prior to 2016, the University of Otago was most recently audited by AQA (as the then New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit) in 2011. The University provided an update against the findings of that audit and the Panel recognised the initiatives undertaken since the Cycle 4 audit. It observed that notwithstanding the progress made, several of the recommendations made during Cycle 4 remain current or are at early stages in implementation. Where the Panel considers that further attention is required in the area of a recommendation, this has been noted in the report.

The University emphasises its research intensity, the role that residential colleges play in the student experience and the importance of both academic and personal development of its graduates. The Panel considered that these points did characterise the University and that they were reflected throughout the materials it reviewed and in interviews with students, staff and members of Council.

The Panel was impressed by the clear and coherent strategic framework and the way in which the University's approach to devolved decision-making was understood and valued across the University. It also recognised that there were a number of systems and processes in place to ensure that differences between departments and disciplines do not mean a lack of equity in opportunity or experience for students or staff. The Panel was also impressed by the way in which devolved decision-making was supported by data and evidence. It notes that, when warranted, the University does take a more centralised approach to particular issues. The Panel has commended the University's approach to, and support of, its strategic direction and decision-making.

The University's planning processes include ensuring that its teaching and learning spaces are current and fit for purpose. It is undertaking significant building programmes and the Panel noted the co-ordination that was occurring between the development of physical and digital infrastructures and endorsed the University's Student Desktop initiative. However, the Panel considers that the University should consider whether its Committee for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching is exercising a fully strategic oversight of learning and teaching developments.

The role of the residential colleges is an important component of the student experience and the University is building on this with the establishment of a position to better co-ordinate student transition and the first-year experience. This is an example of an initiative that the University is managing centrally, rather than in a devolved manner. The Panel endorses this approach and was impressed with the emphasis that the University places on student transition and the range of programmes and support for specific groups of students.

At the time of the audit, the University was engaged with a series of changes. These included the implementation of a new student management system. Although the technical installation of this was almost complete, changes to student and staff processes were either still ongoing or being embedded. Several of the affirmations or recommendations that the Panel has made refer to the potential to further leverage the benefits of this new system, including how course advice is delivered and early identification of students who are at risk of under-performance.

The Panel was impressed by the University's approach to assessing the extent to which its graduates had developed and applied attributes in their graduate profile and its efforts to seek and use feedback from graduates and employers on the attainment of the attributes. It also considered that membership of the Matariki Network of Universities offered further potential for both staff and students. One aspect of the curriculum that the Panel considers should be developed further is how Māori knowledge and pedagogy are incorporated. It anticipates that the Māori Strategic Framework will provide a mechanism for consolidating examples of good practice across the University and progressing this issue.

The University makes good use of student feedback in identifying opportunities for improvement as part of an overall commitment and systematic approach to gaining student input into the activities and processes of the University. The Panel has recommended that the University ensure that students are made aware of the impact of their feedback.

The Panel considered the University has strong processes for induction and review of staff and that these processes supported a culture of teaching excellence. The Panel was also impressed by the University's support for teaching innovation and its recognition of teaching excellence. It endorses the University's intention to enhance its system of evaluation of teaching.

The University identified enhancements to its supervision of research students. The Panel has endorsed these and has recommended that the University continue to assess and consider the impacts of variability in the support for postgraduate research students across divisions.

The University identified eight planned enhancements in its Self-review Report, a number of which the Panel has specifically endorsed. Other major developments in progress were noted. The Panel has made 12 commendations, 7 affirmations and 6 recommendations. This evaluation reflects the Panel's view that the University of Otago is performing well across the activities and areas that are the subject of the Cycle 5 Academic Audit.

The full report is available from the AQA website: www.aqa.ac.nz

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