

Quality assurance of tertiary education in New Zealand: The Universities

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Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities¹

Overview

Quality assurance of tertiary education² in New Zealand is underpinned by a legislative framework, a common set of rules for programme approval and accreditation, and a focus on external review to provide an independent judgement of institutions' performance and capability in self-assessment.

New Zealand universities, institutes of technology, polytechnics and wānanga are set up (or 'registered') by the Government under legislation. Following registration, these organisations are required to undergo external quality assurance to be eligible to receive government funding.

External quality assurance of academic programmes and institutions is undertaken by three core bodies:

- Non-university sector:
 - New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)
- University sector:
 - Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA)
 - Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP)

In addition, since 2003 the Tertiary Education Commission has undertaken a quality assessment of research, through its periodic Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) exercise.³

Approximately half of all New Zealand tertiary students are enrolled in the university sector and half in the non-university sector (institutes of technology, polytechnics, wānanga⁴, private training establishments and government training establishments).⁵ All tertiary education organisations must adhere to the same rules for programme approval and accreditation. NZQA is responsible for consulting on and setting these rules. NZQA is also responsible for registering private training establishments.

It should be noted that while external quality assurance plays an important role in ensuring the quality of teaching and learning provided to students in New Zealand, the primary responsibility for

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² Tertiary education includes all forms of post-secondary education. It includes higher (degree-level) education as well as sub-degree level and vocational education.

³ The Tertiary Education Commission is effectively the funding body for New Zealand tertiary institutions. For further information about PBRF see <http://www.tec.govt.nz/Funding/Fund-finder/Performance-Based-Research-Fund-PBRF-/quality-evaluation/>

⁴ Wananga are tertiary education institutions that provide education in a Māori cultural context.

⁵ 2011, on a full-time equivalency basis. Source: Education Counts, Tertiary Statistics. www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/tertiary_education/provider_summary

the quality of education delivered rests with the organisation that provides those services. Accordingly, New Zealand tertiary institutions may be subject to other forms of external review, dependent upon their course offerings and activities, including those undertaken by professional and international accrediting bodies.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)⁶

The Education Act 1989⁷ and its subsequent amendments established NZQA as the body responsible for quality assurance of the non-university sector. Approximately half of all New Zealand tertiary students are enrolled in the non-university sector which includes institutes of technology, polytechnics, wānanga, private training establishments and government training establishments.⁸

NZQA is an operationally independent Crown Entity governed by an independent Board who are appointed by the Minister of Education. NZQA's duties are wide-ranging and include managing the New Zealand Qualifications Framework, administering the secondary school assessment system, and registering private training establishments.⁹ NZQA is also responsible for consulting on and setting the rules for programme approval and accreditation to which all New Zealand providers of tertiary education, including the universities, must adhere.

NZQA approves qualifications offered by these institutions and monitors the quality of the institutions that underpins their delivery, via registration (in the case of private training establishments), course approval, course accreditation, moderation and external evaluation and review. NZQA undertakes external evaluation and review of non-university tertiary education organisations to provide an independent judgement of their educational performance and capability in self-assessment.

NZQA is, itself, subject to regular external review and was last independently evaluated in 2012.

Academic Quality Assurance of New Zealand Universities

New Zealand has eight universities, all established by Act of Parliament. There is no ongoing institutional accreditation for institutions as a whole, though institutions may be accredited for specific purposes, for example to offer specific programmes of study.

The Education Act assigns responsibility for quality assurance of the university sector to the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee (NZVCC), a body comprised of the Vice-Chancellors of each of the eight universities. To discharge this obligation, the NZVCC (now operating as Universities New Zealand – Te Pōkai Tara) established two distinct bodies: the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) and the Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP).

⁶ For further information see www.nzqa.govt.nz

⁷ Education Act 1989. www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1989/0080/latest/DLM175959.html

⁸ 2011, on a full-time equivalency basis. Source: Education Counts, Tertiary Statistics. www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/tertiary_education/provider_summary

⁹ Institutes of technology, polytechnics, universities and wānanga do not need to be registered, as they are set up by the Government under legislation.

Quality assurance activities overseen by CUAP and AQA for the university sector are underpinned by the following principles.

1. Developed by the universities:

CUAP and AQA were established by the universities and operate with their full support. Their functions and operating procedures are reviewed regularly. AQA's academic audit framework has been developed in consultation with the universities and other stakeholders (including students).

2. Evidence-based:

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

3. Enhancement-led:

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

4. Founded on self-review:

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

5. Assured by peer review:

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

6. Collective and collegial:

CUAP and AQA function with the cooperation of all New Zealand universities and the engagement and expertise of individuals representing key stakeholders such as students, employers, professionals and other members of the universities' communities. Both CUAP and the Board of AQA include student members.

7. Individually binding:

All universities are subject to the requirements, and bound by the overall decisions, of the quality assurance system. On the other hand, the quality assurance processes ensure that the individual character and distinctive missions of each university are respected.

8. Internationally benchmarked and endorsed:

International auditors are a feature of every AQA audit panel, and CUAP and AQA procedures are informed by professional relationships with similar international agencies. In addition, many AQA auditors also audit in other jurisdictions, bringing an international perspective to their work in New Zealand. AQA's quality assurance system is consistent with the INQAAHE Guidelines for Good Practice for quality assurance agencies.

9. Independently operated:

AQA is funded by the universities but is operationally independent. AQA has a separate board, staff and independently appointed auditors. The AQA Constitution also includes a clause prohibiting “interference” in quality assurance processes by any university or Vice-Chancellor, either collectively or individually. Neither CUAP nor AQA may include any ministerial representative; these bodies are independent of government.

10. Publically accountable:

The reports of institutional academic audit are public reports, satisfying the public accountability responsibility. CUAP decisions result in placement of qualifications on the NZQF.

Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities¹⁰

AQA (previously known as the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit) was established in 1993 and is an independent body whose purpose is to contribute to the advancement of university education by: engaging as a leader and advocate in the development of academic quality; applying quality assurance and quality enhancement processes that assist universities in improving student engagement, academic experience and learning outcomes within a culture of research-informed teaching. It does so, primarily, by conducting institutional audits of universities.

AQA was modelled on the (then) UK Academic Audit Unit and drew on the experiences of its inaugural director, Dr David Woodhouse, during his time as the Director of the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation. The AQA governing board is appointed by Universities New Zealand - Te Pōkai Tara and includes representatives from the Vice-Chancellors, the Tertiary Education Union, students, and persons drawn from professional and employer bodies and the wider community.

AQA’s first academic audits were undertaken between 1995 and 1998 looking at the whole of institutions. Cycle 2 (2000 - 2001) and Cycle 3 (2002 – 2007) audits were focused on specific themes of research, and of teaching and learning, respectively. Cycle 4 audits (2008 – 2012) were comprehensive, whole-of-institution audits.

The Cycle 5 audit programme, from 2013-2016, focuses on teaching and learning and student support. The framework covers academic activities and quality assurance processes which might be considered to be fundamental in a contemporary university of good standing.¹¹ The framework has been developed in consultation with the universities and other stakeholders, including students. It also reflects statutory obligations of universities, in particular obligations to Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi; specifications within the Education Act about degree teaching being undertaken mainly by staff who are research-active; requirements under the Code of Practice for Pastoral Care of International students.

Academic audits are carried out by panels of auditors trained by AQA and selected from universities’ senior academic staff and from others with knowledge of academic auditing and evaluation. Each panel includes at least one overseas external auditor. An academic audit begins with a process of self-review, creating an audit portfolio that the university uses to evaluate its progress towards

¹⁰ For further information see www.aqa.ac.nz

¹¹ AQA, 2013. “Cycle 5 Academic Audit Framework”. Available online: www.aqa.ac.nz/cycle5framework.

achieving the goals and objectives related to the focus of the audit. The audit panel verifies the portfolio through documentation, interviews and site visits.

Final audit reports commend good practice and make recommendations intended to assist universities in their own progress of continuous improvement. All AQA university academic audit reports are publicly available from the AQA website. Progress on the recommendations is submitted to the AQA Board in a follow-up report 12 months later, and a report on progress in implementing recommendations forms part of the self-review process in the next audit round.

The focus of AQA academic audit is on enhancement-led self-review by the institutions and on the continuous improvement of quality processes. New Zealand universities' systems for monitoring and enhancing quality in their teaching and learning, research and administrative activities, and facilities, are on-going and subject to regular internal and external review (including but not limited to AQA academic audit). These processes and systems have refined over time, with academic audit being just one factor prompting change. Analysis suggests that Cycle 1 "had the greatest impact and provided a real impetus to change the way in which universities operated. External audit of quality processes was new, and while universities may have reviewed various processes from time to time, either as part of a multi-year cycle or whenever there was an issue to be addressed, the Cycle 1 audit was the first time for most universities in which a full institutional review had taken place."¹² A further look at audit reports since 2000 shows a decline in the number of recommendations and an increase in commendations/affirmations in each audit cycle, which is attributed to a maturing of both the audit model and of the quality systems within New Zealand universities.¹³

AQA maintains professional relationships with all quality assurance bodies working in tertiary education in New Zealand and with similar agencies internationally. It is a full member of INQAAHE and adheres to its guidelines in quality assurance conduct. AQA is, itself, subject to regular external review and was last independently evaluated in 2009.

Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP)¹⁴

CUAP was established in 1990. It considers academic matters across the university system including the exercise of programme approval and moderation procedures, provides advice and comment on academic developments, and encourages the universities to develop courses of study that will facilitate the transfer of students between programmes and institutions. This system of collective peer review of new academic programmes continues a tradition in place since the university colleges of the University of New Zealand were established in the 1870s and that has continued after New Zealand universities were granted autonomy in 1962.¹⁵

¹² Jennings, JM and Cameron, J (2013 forthcoming). "External Quality Audit" ed. Professor Chenicheri, Sid Nair and Dr Patricie Mertova. Chandos Publishing

¹³ AQA, 2011. "A thematic overview of institutional audit 2000 – 2010". Available online: www.aqa.ac.nz/SeriesonQuality11.

¹⁴ For further information: see www.universitiesnz.ac.nz/aboutus/sc/cuap

¹⁵ For more information about the history of CUAP and AQA (previously NZUAAU), refer "External Quality Audit" *op.cit.*

CUAP comprises a representative of each university and is chaired by a Vice-Chancellor. Its membership includes a student representative. CUAP is the body to which universities must submit any proposals to offer new qualifications or to make substantial changes to existing qualifications. CUAP uses a peer review process to evaluate and approval proposals from the universities, which range from new qualifications and subjects to changed entry requirements and altered subject names.

CUAP operates a moderation process as a follow-up to the initial approval of qualifications. This process requires consideration of formal reviews of all new programmes following the graduation of the first cohort of students.

CUAP is, itself, subject to regular external review and was last independently evaluated in 2011.

Conclusion

Quality assurance of New Zealand tertiary education institutions is well-established. This is observable through mature quality systems in most tertiary education institutions - systems and practices that are monitored and validated by external agencies who are, themselves, subject to national QA requirements and regular evaluation. A strong emphasis is placed on enhancement-led, continuous improvement of quality processes. This commitment is underpinned by self-review, peer review, and by national and international cooperation with regard to QA practices to help ensure New Zealand tertiary education is of an internationally recognised high standard.