Summary: A thematic overview of institutional audit 2000 – 2010

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This *Series on Quality* report reflects on the New Zealand university academic audit reports completed since 2000. It is designed to provide a snapshot of common issues, challenges and successes characterising the academic quality of New Zealand universities over the past 10 years. The report also suggests themes which might emerge or continue to occupy New Zealand universities' attention in the area of academic quality in the coming years. The full report is available from the NZUAAU website: www.nzuaau.ac.nz/seriesonquality11.

Key findings

Twenty-one audits of New Zealand universities were conducted between 2000 and 2010, resulting in more than 650 recommendations, commendations and affirmations on matters of academic quality. Although Cycle 4 will not be completed until 2012, it is nevertheless apparent that *the number of recommendations made by audit panels is decreasing in each cycle.* 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.
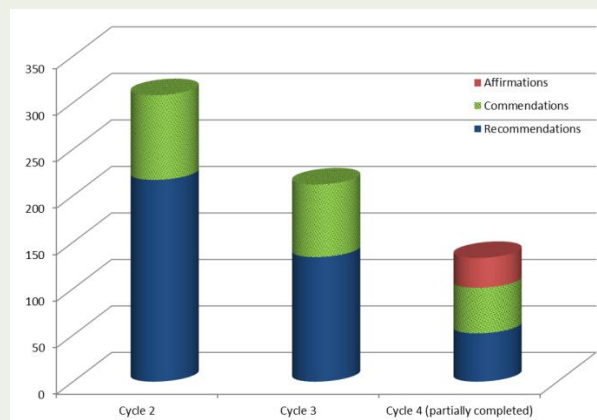

Figure 1: Academic audit recommendations, commendations and affirmations by cycle, 2000 – 2010

The role of institutional audit is increasingly one of affirming and commending good practice, and fine-tuning the implementation of recommendations already adopted by the institutions.

Universities were commended for significant redevelopments in information technology and library services, and improvements in student services and campus life. Commendations also focused on universities' approaches to programme development and approval, and evidence of interaction between teaching and research.

Evaluation of teaching (including responding to student feedback) was the most prominent theme of recommendations about teaching and learning made to New Zealand universities. This continues to be a theme in the current audit cycle, along with affirmation of actions underway in several institutions to address this issue.

Universities 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 highlighted the importance of systems designed to identify and support students at risk.*

Internationalisation of the curriculum received some attention throughout the decade, and continues to feature in universities' strategic intentions, but appears not to be fully embedded within the teaching and learning and other activities of most institutions.

Audit panels found a level of divergence between some institutions' stated strategic objectives in the use of technology in course delivery, and visible outcomes. Institutions were reminded of the importance of monitoring the effectiveness of new technologies to ensure improved success and outcomes for learners, including students learning from a distance.

Universities received many commendations and recommendations in the areas of postgraduate student supervision and examination, enrolment and support. The same challenges remain: 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.

University frameworks for commercialisation have been commended, as have the establishment of research institutes and centres.
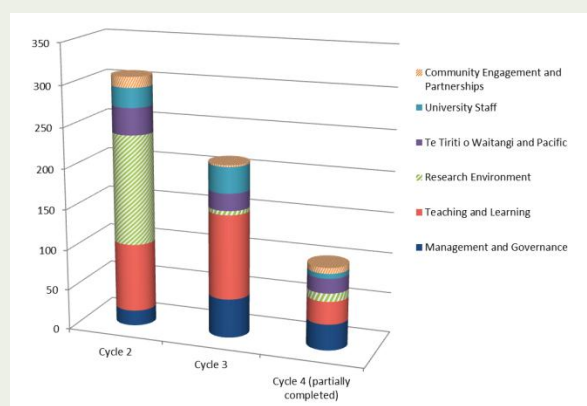

Figure 2: Academic audit recommendations and commendations by cycle and broad theme, 2000 – 2010

The proportion of recommendations and commendations related to management and governance has grown in each audit cycle [Fig 2]. This is likely to reflect greater university differentiation, increased compliance responsibilities, and growth in the complexity of institutional decision-making.

Quality assurance frameworks have been a 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. *Recommendations have reinforced the need for quality assurance systems that make a strong link between strategic objectives, policies, and practices.*

Most universities appear to be actively involved in national and, to a lesser extent, international benchmarking of a variety of activities across the institutions. A focus remains on the identification and application of appropriate benchmarks to assist in the enhancement of research-led teaching and learning.

Audit panels found much to commend in universities' commitment to the advancement of Māori students and staff. They also found areas where further action was desirable to give effect to strategic objectives, particularly in the development of meaningful and effective relationships with Māori.

Over the course of the decade, audit panels began to highlight the need for greater commitment and visible actions in pursuit of the advancement of Pacific students and staff.

Audit panels have highlighted the need for better integration of staff training and development activities across the university. *A particular focus of more recent audit panels has been on the need for leadership and management training and development.*

Universities were commended for their close ties with the cities and regions in which they are located and delivering services, and for their efforts to build positive and effective working relationships with local communities. Levels of international engagement and collaboration grew during the decade, and universities were commended for initiatives that involved tangible opportunities for teaching and research collaboration.