

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES QUALITY AGENCY

**Quality Assurance and Standards of Australian Higher Education
Based on the Institutional Audit Reports of AUQA**

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Quality Assurance and Standards of Australian Higher Education Based on the Institutional Audit Reports of AUQA

1. Background

The fourth of the objectives specified in the current Constitution of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) is the requirement to 'report on the relative standards of the Australian higher education system and its quality assurance processes, including their international standing, as a result of information obtained during the audit process'. This report is an effort to work towards meeting this objective, based on 25 published audit reports of self-accrediting institutions.

AUQA decided that it would produce at least one report relating to Objective 4 in its first five-year cycle, and would do this towards the end of the cycle. This report was considered by the AUQA Board at its meeting in June 2006.

2. Building on Earlier Efforts

There are three past efforts that feed into this – '2002 Institutional Audit Reports: Analysis and Comments' by Dr Anne Martin; 'On-going Analyses of Commendations and Recommendations in AUQA Audit Reports' by Professor Ray W Cooksey published in September 2003; and 'Meta-Analysis of AUQA Institutional Reports 2002-4' by Professor Susan Holland. Although these reports vary greatly in their objectives, sample and methodology, all of them contribute to this present report in one way or the other. Dr. Anne Martin's report and Professor Susan Holland's report were initiated by AUQA Board. While commissioning the thematic analysis by Dr Anne Martin the Board of AUQA noted that 'This summary will feed into the overall assessment made by AUQA in due course in fulfilment of its fourth objective to report on the higher education sector as a whole'. Professor Ray Cooksey's report is his own initiative but is valuable to this discussion.

In each of the three previous efforts to analyse the AUQA audit reports, there are elements that are helpful in shaping the current effort to report on the relative standards and quality assurance processes of the auditees. A brief note about these three reports and how the present report builds on those efforts is given below.

2.1 '2002 Institutional Audit Reports: Analysis and Comments' by Dr Anne Martin

The Board of AUQA commissioned Dr Martin early in 2003 to prepare a thematic summary of the audit reports of institutional audits carried out in 2002. At the time of commissioning, eight audit reports had been published and the thematic summary was intended to assist AUQA and its Board to gain an overview of the information arising from the first institutional audits, and thereby to begin to assemble an appreciation of standards and quality assurance processes across the Australian higher education system.

Dr Martin's report presents an analytic overview of themes and issues emerging from the audit reports of self-accrediting institutions (SAIs). The report begins with a sector overview and is divided into sections based on the main headings used in the Audit Reports. Within each section are identified Key Issues (those which occasioned commendations and recommendations in a number of reports) and Other Matters (those raised in the body of the reports or in only one or two recommendations or commendations). The report presents 71 issues – 39 key issues and 32 other issues – under 12 themes.

Overall, Dr Martin's report indicated that the Audit Reports did not show any single, consistent gap in the academic standards of the SAI sector. In the main, the picture that emerged was of committed staff and satisfied students, generally sound QA practices to support teaching and learning and research and research training, recognition and appreciation from the communities served by the institutions, and an active international presence. There was variation in the strength of institutional management and infrastructure to support academic activities. Most of the institutions had introduced a variety of review and redefinition exercises in anticipation of the audit and there were many newly initiated QA processes. Outreach teaching in all its forms - offshore campuses, partnerships and external delivery – was identified as an issue that presented challenges for maintaining consistency of standards, of resourcing and of planning.

2.2 'On-going Analyses of Commendations and Recommendations in AUQA Audit Reports' by Professor Ray W Cooksey

By September 2003, when AUQA had conducted three trial audits (of which the reports were not published) and published 10 formal audit reports, Professor Ray W Cooksey carried out an analysis of the commendations and recommendations that AUQA Audit Panels produced across different universities. Among other things, the analysis recognised the potential for learning from the commendations and recommendations certain consistent themes that can be identified as emerging across universities. These themes can point to more general problem areas in the sector as well as to areas where the sector appears to be doing well.

To carry out the analysis, ten major macro themes were identified. Under these ten macro themes, 83 micro themes were identified and all the commendations and recommendations were coded under these themes. To highlight emergent patterns, Professor Ray Cooksey identified 'more prevalent micro sub-themes' and 'highly prevalent micro-themes'. Although AUQA discourages anyone from seeing the number of commendations or recommendations in an audit report as some sort of 'quality index', it might be possible to derive some cautious conclusions based on the numbers that emerge in relation to sub-themes. In this way, Professor Ray Cooksey's report identifies the more prevalent micro sub-themes in each macro category based on a very rough criterion of containing five or more coded instances. Highly prevalent micro-themes are based on a very rough criterion of containing ten or more coded instances.

The analysis revealed that in commending universities on aspects of their functioning, AUQA found the main areas of achievements to be External & Partner Relations, Management, Staff & Student Support Systems, and Quality Assurance. It also indicated that virtually all of the 'prevalent micro-themes' for commendation, with the exception of facilities & learning environment, were also 'prevalent micro themes' for recommendations, some of them highly so (eg, mission-vision-strategy focus, QA framework, planning & monitoring). Communication management was emerging as the key focal theme for the recommendations. Benchmarking appeared to be a process emphasised in recommendations.

2.3 'Meta-Analysis of AUQA Institutional Reports 2002-4' by Professor Susan Holland

In this report, the meta-analysis was undertaken in a number of steps. Major functions identified in the audit reports and the way these were categorised by the institutions in their portfolio submissions were identified. Four major functions and five supporting activities were identified. To these two kinds of activities (Major Activity and Supporting Activity) a number of categories/topics were assigned in each case.

Commendations and recommendations were coded under these categories. The table was further analysed to see the extent of coverage of aspects, other aspects that should desirably be included, and the general aspects of consistency or lack thereof between the reports.

The overall conclusion from the meta-analysis was that there are very few aspects of academic activity that are not covered at least to some extent in the audit reports considered. The report also identified new topics that need attention, emerging issues as audits progress, the topics with the highest rankings in terms of total citations, the categories for which citations concerned with outcomes were low, and coverage trends over time. The analysis was positive in general about the consistency aspects of the audit reports.

2.4. Drawing on Methods

All the three analyses have taken a similar initial approach. They present comprehensive classifications that cover the core areas of functioning of Australian higher education institutions. They analyse the audit reports in relation to those identified classifications. They part in the analysis and reporting style to suit the specific purpose each analysis was intended to serve. For each of the issues considered, Dr Anne Martin's report presents an observed pattern or analysis, drawing data from the eight audit reports. This **style of presenting provisional generalisations** is useful to highlight some general issues for attention that are not readily apparent from individual reports, and this style has been adopted for the current report.

However, for every issue under analysis, Dr Martin's report draws inferences from both commendations and recommendations and presents a general picture. This approach does not exactly result in a comparative picture. Further, as the number of reports to be considered increases, this would result in a situation where for every aspect/issue under

consideration the report might end up indicating that ‘some institutions are towards the positive end and the others are at the other end’ which would not be helpful to draw a comparative picture. Therefore, for the present report on relative standards, areas that are **clear commendations need to be separated from the ones that are clear recommendations**. Professor Cooksey’s approach is useful to do that.

Drawing from Professor Cooksey’s method, it is possible to identify the areas with **more prevalent commendations** and the ones with **more prevalent recommendations**. It can be inferred that the more prevalent commendations are the areas where many Australian higher education institutions have demonstrated their strengths and therefore might indicate in general areas where the relative standards of Australian higher education institutions are high. Similarly, the more prevalent areas of recommendations may be considered as areas where many Australian higher education institutions need to make improvements.

2.5. Drawing on Results

The classifications used in all the three analyses are equally valuable for studying the themes that emerge from the audit reports. However, Professor Holland’s analysis has a wider coverage of 19 reports. It has the added advantage of codifying the commendations and recommendations into various themes. In addition, the audit reports that contain those commendations and recommendations have been recorded systematically. That is helpful for expanding the codification to all published audit reports. Therefore, the audit conclusions of six more SAIs were coded based on Professor Susan Holland’s classification.

3. Reporting on Relative Standards

To identify the more prevalent areas of commendation, the following criterion was applied: ‘areas where the number of commendations is more than the recommendations and with more than 5 occurrences, considering all the 25 SAI audit reports published by October 2005’.

This process of reduction was extended to recommendations as well and thus there are two clusters – areas with more prevalent commendations and areas with more prevalent recommendations. It is possible to arrive at many different sets of criteria to identify ‘more prevalent commendations’ and ‘more prevalent recommendations’. What is presented here is just one approach.

4. Aspects with More Prevalent Commendations

Following the reduction process results in the following list of ‘Aspects with more prevalent commendations’:

International Activity

Standards and Quality of Offshore Teaching

Services to International Students

Teaching and Learning

Flexible Learning/delivery
Teaching and Learning Environment
Academic Support Centres
Special Features of Teaching and Learning
Indigenous Education

Research and Research Training

Research Strategy – Critical Mass
Research Strategy – Investment
Research Culture
Research Outcomes

Community Engagement and Partnerships

Community Outreach
Community Engagement

Quality Assurance Systems and Governance

Self-Review
Quality Assurance Framework

Leadership and Strategy

Mission, Vision and Strategic Direction
Organisational Structure

5. Aspects with More Prevalent Recommendations

A similar process results in the following list of ‘Aspects with more prevalent recommendations’:

International Activity

Quality Assurance Systems for International Programs
Internationalisation Strategy

Teaching and Learning

Academic Reviews
Accreditation and Re-accreditation
Quality Assurance re Teaching and Learning
Role of Academic Board
Teacher Quality and Pedagogy
Moderation, Assessment and Standards
External Stakeholder Input – Course Advisory Committees
Student Feedback
Graduate Attributes
Library Resources
Teaching/Research Nexus

Research and Research Training

Research Strategy -Planning
Research Training
Resources to Support Research Students
Research Supervision
Commercial Activity

Quality Assurance Systems and Governance

Performance Management and Benchmarking
Policies and Planning
Risk and Business Management
Role of Council
Management Reviews

Leadership and Strategy

Implementation of Strategic Priorities
Leadership, Culture and Communication

Student Services

Access to Information/Complaint Processes
Student Support
Student Engagement

Staff Services

Workplace Planning
Training and Development
Managing Workload and Performance of Staff

Corporate Services

Budgetary Systems
IT and Communication Services

For each of these areas, drawing from the audit conclusions and the evidence considered by the audit panels to arrive at those conclusions, inferences can be drawn about the standards of Australian higher education institutions. This is similar to the presentation style of Dr Martin's report. However, in practice, when we look at the type of information available in the audit reports, to write this type of comparative analysis, there are many limitations.

6. Limitations of Comparative Data Available

There are difficulties with the comparative data one can get from the audit reports, for three main reasons.

Firstly, AUQA does not impose an externally prescribed set of standards upon auditees, but rather uses, as its primary starting point for audit, each organisation's own objectives. This approach recognises the auditee's autonomy in setting its objectives and places explicit responsibility on the auditee to devise systematic process for evaluating its objectives. The core task of AUQA audit panels is to consider the auditee's performance against these objectives. This makes generalisations and comparisons difficult in a sector that is marked by a high level of organisational complexity and diversity.

Although the audit panel elucidates how the institution judges its teaching and research in relation to national and international standards, the starting point is again the auditee's own objectives. For example, the audit report of University X, while drawing inferences on how well the university achieves its research objectives and priorities, makes the following observations: "AUQA audits each institution against its own objectives, not in comparison with other institutions. However, University X has explicitly set comparative

research goals that refer to other national and international institutions. It is therefore relevant to report that University X is performing well on these objectives, lying in the top four Australian universities on most absolute measures'. In other words, how the audit panels approach 'relative standards' depends on the place the institution gives to its own relative standards, and while some institutions have aspired for high standards at the national level, others have considered international standing. There are audit reports where the universities that have set 'international standing' of a high level as one of their objectives have been given recommendations on how to ensure that. They are not areas for improvement in absolute terms, but only in terms of the set goals and objectives that are yet to be achieved. Due to this institution-specific assessment framework, it is difficult to deduce even the level of national standing.

Secondly, while SAIs prepare the portfolio trying to critically evaluate themselves, their assumptions about and understanding of their 'performance in teaching and research in relation to national and international standards' may be inconsistent. Many SAIs have international competitiveness or international recognition as a priority objective. Many of them have embedded this objective in their internationalisation strategies. However, the understanding of 'internationalisation' varies widely among the SAIs. With so much happening in the area of internationalisation, a clear understanding is yet to emerge on what is appropriate and desirable for Australian higher education institutions. This has had an impact on the way in which SAIs have presented the evidence in relation to their 'international standing'.

Thirdly, the audit panels have looked at the benchmarking efforts and use of performance indicators by the institutions, but the panels might not have paid close attention to international comparators. Even if they have, recording the verified data on international standing to support audit conclusions might not have been attempted by all the audit panels consistently and systematically.

These three points lead to the question: Do the audit reports provide sufficient/adequate validated or verified information recorded consistently and systematically, to draw inferences about the international standing of the Australian higher education system? An attempt was made to answer this question by reading and analysing the 25 published audit reports of SAIs as on October 2005 and the observations are given below.

7. Observations Based on the Available Data

The observations based on the reading of the reports are given in the following pages in two parts – section 7.1 on relative standards of Australian higher education institutions and section 7.2 on the quality assurance processes of the Australian higher education institutions.

7.1. Relative Standards

First reading of the reports revealed that observations and conclusions of the audit panels on performance indicators, benchmarks, national and international competitiveness and

internationalisation efforts of the SAIs are likely to give information about relative standards. However, as mentioned above, the audit panels did not have this agenda (reporting on relative standards) in mind while formulating their observations and conclusions recorded in the audit reports. Keeping this caution in the background, the audit reports were gleaned for the type of information that throws light on the relative standards of the audited SAIs.

A reading of the audit reports with specific reference to comparative data, including the ones that can indicate international standing, indicates the following:

Internationalisation and international competitiveness

- All institutions have internationalisation strategies. But most of the strategies are about increasing international students' enrolment and offering educational services offshore. They are not about quality and standards of the SAIs in the international context or in comparison to similar institutions from other countries.
- 'Lack of clarity' about the internationalisation strategies has been mentioned in many audit conclusions.
- Many institutions have made specific references about their 'becoming internationally competitive' or 'becoming world-class'. But mostly these goals are interpreted in a narrow manner and the audit conclusions mention this.
- Efforts to establish benchmarks to monitor international competitiveness and to substantiate international standing have been scarce. Consequently, evidence that could demonstrate international standing of institutions and that could be reliably accepted by the audit panels is also inadequate.

Benchmark efforts

- Most audit conclusions on the claims of the SAIs about their international standing are about how benchmarking and indicators to support the claims are inadequate. Lack of international benchmarking has emerged as an area recommended for attention.
- The benchmarking efforts mentioned in the audit reports are mostly at the institutional level and they are not of much value to draw inferences about relative standing. In fact, recommendations on benchmarking often comment that the institutional benchmarks need to incorporate external points of reference.
- Of all the audit conclusions related to benchmarks and relative standards, more than two thirds are recommendations and only a few are clear commendations.
- Where there are commendations on benchmark efforts, they are about acknowledging the initial efforts and they also indicate that much more has to be done to draw further conclusions on the standards *per se*.

Benchmark performance

- There are commendations on benchmarking performance and they are mostly about national level performance.
- There are audit reports where institutional claims about their performance and national and international standing have been questioned by the audit panels. This confirms that it would not be possible to supplement the audit conclusions in a significant way by using the data given in the portfolios.

Comparative phrases

- Certain aspects of research, teaching, and community engagement emerge as areas where many positive comparative phrases have been used in the audit conclusions. At the same time certain other aspects of these broad areas emerge as recommendations as well.
- All but seven SAIs have been commended highly for some aspect of research performance with an indication of relatively high performance. Those seven SAIs have received good commendations in comparative terms for their strength in teaching related aspects. The audit conclusions also indicate that these seven SAIs have taken initiatives to look more closely at their research performance by initiating reviews and almost all of them have already begun to address the issues to improve their research performance.
- The nature of commendations and recommendations in relation to quality assurance systems and international activity is variable and they will be dealt with separately in the next part of the summary.
- In relation to the classification categories used for coding the commendations and recommendations, one category, namely supporting activities (strategy, systems and services) seems to be heavy on recommendations. Student services, staff services and corporate services have many recommendations.

Limitations

- The audit reports have been published over a period of three years, December 2002 to October 2005. In a rapidly changing higher education sector this time span makes generalisations and comparisons about institutional standing difficult.
- Related to the time span is another factor that needs consideration. Institutions for which 18 months has passed since the audit have submitted progress reports. The progress reports indicate that institutions have taken action on almost all recommendations. Considering the data from a 2002 audit report, without any regard for the progress made over three years, and synthesising it with the data taken from the 2005 report does not give any valid generalisation about the relative standard of the institutions. At the same time, it is not within the remit of AUQA to validate the progress reports to consider the action taken by the institutions (until the cycle two audits).

In summary:

1. Many institutions have 'international standing' as a goal. The audit reports, however, observe that there is little evidence that this goal has been achieved, except possibly in some isolated areas of activity, and recommend the need for indicators and benchmarking before this goal can be measured or its achievement substantiated.
2. International benchmarking which can be a good indicator to draw inferences about the relative standards of the SAIs has emerged as a clear area of recommendation.
3. Audit reports provide very little information that could be used to report on relative standards of audited SAIs.
4. In broad categories there are many audit conclusions that indicate the positive international standing of the SAIs in teaching and research.
5. The interpretation given to internationalisation and evidence provided by SAIs about their internationalisation strategies have been often questioned by the audit panels.

The above-mentioned points may be useful while planning the focus or areas of emphasis of cycle 2 audits. These emphases need to be adequately considered in the training of auditors (and orientation of the SAIs).

7.2 Quality Assurance Processes

The audit reports indicate that all institutions have a reasonably well developed quality assurance framework (QAF) in place. None of the audit conclusions question the QAFs but there are recommendations for further strengthening. There are many commendations about the overall framework and the recommendations are mostly about integration, implementation and monitoring.

Institutions follow a variety of practices to implement the QAF and there are many audit conclusions that comment on the effectiveness or otherwise of those approaches. Institutions have developed documents and guidelines on implementing the QAF and the level of sophistication varies, with some frameworks having complex layers of arrangements. The need to ensure coordination at various levels of implementing the guidelines and need to simplify the layers of arrangements have been noted in a few audit conclusions.

Some specific observations are:

1. Most QAFs specify continuous improvement as a key dimension/goal and carry out a variety of reviews - systematic and/or ad hoc – self and/or external – at various levels towards improvement. Many institutions have been commended for the thoroughness and openness with which self-reviews have been conducted and for the improvements identified in that process. However, effectiveness of the

action plans identified as an outcome of the self-review and the need to prioritise them have been noted by the audit panels.

2. All institutions have reasonably well defined academic reviews and the recommendations are about appropriate standards, scope, coverage within a time frame, frequency, enhancing the effectiveness and follow-up.
3. Recommendations on accreditation and re-accreditation of programs are about expanding the scope (eg, formal approval for change of mode, change of location), information dissemination about the accreditation status, accelerating the process, and benchmarking.
4. The role of the Academic Board (AB) seems to be an area that has received many recommendations. They are about the role of AB in establishing processes for comparability of standards, AB's involvement in certain academic activities, its role in offshore program related issues, strengthening its ability to maintain oversight of academic activities, and clarifying relationship with other bodies.
5. On quality assurance in teaching and learning, recommendations are more about ensuring standards, ensuring consistency across campuses and courses, adopting good practice and ensuring alignment with the standards and policies of the university.
6. In many cases, assessment policy seems to vary among faculties, within an institution. Professional accreditation is taken as the quality assurance mechanism for professional programs and there are many recommendations about ensuring standards in other programs. On assessment policy and ensuring standards, the recommendations are mostly about practices related to moderation, monitoring students' outcomes, attrition rates, plagiarism, credibility and performance of offshore partners, cross-campus equivalence of academic programs including offshore campuses and clarity in graduate standards.

Compared to the audit conclusions on quality assurance of operations within the country, the offshore programs have received more recommendations on the basic QA arrangements. Some specific observations regarding the commendations and recommendations are:

1. Quality Assurance processes for and standards of offshore programs have received adequate attention of the audit panels. Four institutions out of 25, have been commended for having appropriate **QA systems in place for transnational programs/courses**. Six more have been commended for aspects such as the following in relation to **quality and standards of offshore teaching**:
 - maintenance of educational standards for offshore students
 - robust manner in which certain programs are offered offshore with maintenance of equivalent standards,

- quality outcomes and international recognition of certain programs
 - effective partnership that provides framework for well supported award programs
 - thorough self-review of offshore programs
 - good practice regarding offshore teaching at PG level
 - good examples of positive and well-managed relationships with offshore partners which help to provide quality education to students.
2. Recommendations under offshore operations are on paying more attention to management of off-campus academic programs, monitoring of offshore partners, clarity in lines of responsibility and accountability, systems for review of transnational programs, internal audit report regarding international arrangements, staff orientation, policies governing entrance and advanced standing and consistency in standards.

8. Conclusion

In broad categories there are many audit conclusions that indicate the positive international standing of the SAIs in teaching, and research. However, audit reports provide very little information that could be used to report on relative standards of audited SAIs. Many institutions have 'international standing' as a goal. The audit reports, however, observe that there is little evidence that this goal has been achieved, except possibly in some isolated areas of activity, and recommend the need for indicators and benchmarking before this goal can be measured or its achievement substantiated. International benchmarking which can be a good indicator to draw inferences about the relative standards of the SAIs has emerged as a clear area of recommendation.

All institutions have a reasonably well developed quality assurance framework (QAF) in place. None of the audit conclusions question the QAFs but there are recommendations for further strengthening. There are many commendations about the overall framework and the recommendations are mostly about integration, implementation and monitoring.

AUQA has to pay attention to these issues while planning the focus or areas of emphases of cycle 2 audits. They need to be considered in the training of auditors and while orientating the institutions about the audit framework.

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