

**AUSTRALIAN  
UNIVERSITIES QUALITY  
AGENCY**

**2002 Institutional Audit Reports  
Analysis and Comment**

**June 2003**

**Dr Anne L Martin**

AUQA Occasional Publications Number 1

ISSN 1446-4268

ISBN 1 877090 15 8

© 2003 Australian Universities Quality Agency

Level 10, 123 Lonsdale Street  
Melbourne, VIC 3000  
Ph 03 9639 1100  
Fax 03 9639 7377

[admin@auqa.edu.au](mailto:admin@auqa.edu.au)

[www.auqa.edu.au](http://www.auqa.edu.au)

The Australian Universities Quality Agency receives financial support from the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments of Australia

## CONTENTS

<b>ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>PREFACE .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Introduction.....	6
Context.....	6
Method.....	6
<b>1     SECTOR CHARACTERISTICS.....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1   Key Issues .....	7
1.1.1   Differentiation in Institutional Missions and Visions .....	7
1.2   Other Matters .....	7
1.2.1   The Legacies of Sector Reform .....	7
1.2.2   The Impact of Continuous Improvement .....	8
1.2.3   The Impact of AUQA .....	8
<b>2     GOVERNANCE, LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATION.....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1   Key Issues .....	9
2.1.1   The Proper Role of Councils.....	9
2.1.2   The Renewal of Academic Governance.....	9
2.1.3   Leadership and Leadership Development.....	10
2.1.4   Management, Organisation and Administration .....	10
2.2   Other Matters .....	10
2.2.1   Devolution, Decentralisation and Locus of Accountability.....	10
<b>3     PLANNING, POLICY AND BUDGET DEVELOPMENT.....</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1   Key Issues .....	11
3.1.1   Strategic Planning: Integration and Implementation of Plans.....	11
3.1.2   Finance and Budget Linked to Plans.....	11
3.1.3   Policy Development and Dissemination .....	12
3.1.4   Communication of Plans and Goals.....	12
3.2   Other Matters .....	12
3.2.1   Budget Models and Management .....	12
3.2.2   Risk Management .....	12
<b>4     QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PERFORMANCE MONITORING .....</b>	<b>13</b>
4.1   Key Issues .....	13
4.1.1   Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement.....	13
4.1.2   Self-reviews and External Reviews .....	13
4.1.3   Performance Indicators and Benchmarks.....	13
4.2   Other Matters .....	14
4.2.1   Management Information Systems .....	14
4.2.2   Accuracy of Information.....	14
<b>5     TEACHING AND LEARNING.....</b>	<b>15</b>
5.1   Key Issues .....	15
5.1.1   External Input into Curriculum.....	15
5.1.2   Accreditation, Review and Reaccreditation of Programs .....	15
5.1.3   Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units.....	15
5.1.4   Graduate Attributes .....	15
5.1.5   Flexible, Online and Distance Teaching .....	16
5.1.6   Dual-sector Issues, Vocational Education and Training Interface.....	16
5.1.7   Ensuring Consistent Standards.....	16
5.2   Other Matters .....	16
5.2.1   Teaching and Learning Plans and Policies .....	16

5.2.2	Pedagogy .....	17
5.2.3	Support for Teaching and Learning .....	17
5.2.4	Assessment and Moderation Standards .....	17
<b>6</b>	<b>RESEARCH AND RESEARCH TRAINING .....</b>	<b>18</b>
6.1	Key Issues .....	18
6.1.1	Improved Research Performance .....	18
6.1.2	Research Planning, Policies and Management .....	18
6.1.3	Higher Degree Supervision and Supervisors .....	18
6.1.4	Monitoring Progress of Research Students .....	19
6.1.5	Research Student Support .....	19
6.1.6	Nexus Between Research and Teaching .....	19
6.2	Other Matters .....	19
6.2.1	Research Centres and Institutes .....	19
6.2.2	Ethics and Safety .....	19
6.2.3	Research Culture and Concentration .....	19
6.2.4	Research Infrastructure .....	20
<b>7</b>	<b>COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT .....</b>	<b>21</b>
7.1	Key Issues .....	21
7.1.1	Partnerships and Linkages .....	21
7.2	Other Matters .....	21
7.2.1	Community Relations and Support .....	21
7.2.2	Leadership .....	21
7.2.3	Alumni .....	21
<b>8</b>	<b>STUDENTS .....</b>	<b>22</b>
8.1	Key Issues .....	22
8.1.1	Support Services .....	22
8.1.2	Indigenous Students .....	22
8.2	Other Matters .....	22
8.2.1	Student Profile and Recruitment .....	22
8.2.2	Student Satisfaction and Experience .....	22
8.2.3	Communication and Involvement .....	22
8.2.4	Student Progress, Appeals and Grievances .....	23
<b>9</b>	<b>STAFF .....</b>	<b>24</b>
9.1	Key Issues .....	24
9.1.1	Planning, Leadership and Policy .....	24
9.1.2	Appointment and Induction .....	24
9.1.3	Professional Development .....	24
9.1.4	Performance Appraisal .....	24
9.2	Other Matters .....	25
9.2.1	Staff Satisfaction and Commitment .....	25
9.2.2	Promotion, Awards and Rewards .....	25
9.2.3	Workload Management .....	25
<b>10</b>	<b>INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES .....</b>	<b>26</b>
10.1	Key Issues .....	26
10.1.1	Quality Assurance for Partnered and Offshore Activities .....	26
10.1.2	Consistency of Standards, Assessment and Curriculum .....	26
10.2	Other Matters .....	27
10.2.1	Support for Onshore International Students .....	27
10.2.2	Management of Partnered Activities .....	27
10.2.3	Internationalising the Curriculum .....	27

<b>11</b>	<b>ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITIES .....</b>	<b>28</b>
11.1	Key Issues .....	28
11.1.1	Commercialisation of Research and Intellectual Property .....	28
11.1.2	Commercialisation of Teaching .....	28
11.2	Other Matters .....	28
11.2.1	Plans, Policies and Management of Entrepreneurial Activities .....	28
<b>12</b>	<b>INFRASTRUCTURE.....</b>	<b>29</b>
12.1	Key Issues .....	29
12.1.1	Libraries .....	29
12.1.2	Information Technology .....	29
12.1.3	Information Systems, Registers and Records.....	29
12.2	Other Matters .....	29
12.2.1	Administration and Service Levels .....	29
12.2.2	Facilities, Buildings and Grounds.....	30
<b>13</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>APPENDIX A:</b>	<b>AUQA'S MISSION, VALUES, &amp; FOUR OBJECTS.....</b>	<b>33</b>



**ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

ADRI .....	A cyclical model of evaluating quality assurance practices, comprising assessment of an organisation's approach, deployment, results and improvement efforts
auditees .....	Those Australian HE entities subject to audit by AUQA, namely universities, self-accrediting institutions and state accrediting agencies
AUQA .....	Australian Universities Quality Agency
HE .....	higher education
IP .....	intellectual property
ISO .....	An abbreviation used typically to refer to the International Organisation for Standardisation
IT .....	information technology
QA .....	quality assurance
SAIs .....	self-accrediting institutions
TAFE .....	Technical and Further Education
VET .....	vocational education and training

## **PREFACE**

### ***Introduction***

Among the objectives specified in the constitution of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) is the mandate to 'arrange and manage a system of periodic audits of the quality assurance (QA) arrangements relating to the activities of Australian universities, other self-accrediting institutions (SAIs) and state and territory higher education (HE) accreditation bodies' and 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' (see Appendix A).

To assist it in fulfilling the latter objective, the Board of AUQA commissioned Dr Anne Martin early in 2003 to prepare a thematic summary of the Audit Reports of AUQA institutional audits carried out in 2002. At the time of commissioning, eight such reports had been published. This thematic summary is 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 QA processes across the Australian HE system. It is an analysis of the audit outcomes, not an evaluation of the audit process.

In 2002, AUQA also audited a state accrediting agency but, since there was but a single report in this category, it has not been included in this summary.

The summary has been prepared on the basis of documentation supplied by AUQA and reflects a personal perspective of the author.

### ***Context***

Eight universities and one self-accrediting college were audited by AUQA in 2002, namely the Universities of Adelaide, Ballarat, Newcastle and Southern Queensland; Curtin and Swinburne Universities of Technology; the Australian Catholic and Macquarie Universities and the Australian Maritime College. In commissioning an analytic overview of themes and issues emerging from the Audit Reports, the Board of AUQA observed that, although the work would cover 'a sample of only 20% of the self-accrediting institutions, it may be possible to provide some provisional generalisations from these reports about matters that are or are not being addressed across the sector, and general issues for attention that are not readily apparent from individual reports. This summary will feed into the overall assessment made by AUQA in due course in fulfilment of its fourth objective [the second objective quoted above] to report on the higher education sector as a whole'.

### ***Method***

The analysis is based on a close, comparative reading of eight institutional Audit Reports; the ninth was still being finalised at the time of the review and was hence not included. Four of the institutional Performance Portfolios were consulted briefly, but they were not read in detail; further, the supporting documentation was not consulted, as it was not the purpose of the reviewer to verify the panels' findings nor to repeat their work.

The analysis 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 or 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).

## 1 SECTOR CHARACTERISTICS

Although the 2002 audit round covered only about one fifth of the institutions under AUQA's remit, the reports present something of a microcosm of the Australian HE sector. The institutions covered are representative in their diversity and reassuring in their vibrancy. Although the issues raised by the Audit Reports point to similarities in the strengths and weaknesses of this heterogeneous group, none is singled out for special praise or special condemnation. The audit snapshots collectively portray a rapidly changing, strongly differentiated sector marked by a high level of organisational complexity and often by instability. While they depict the sector as fundamentally sound, they also highlight the extent to which the institutions have been challenged by external imperatives.

### 1.1 *Key Issues*

#### 1.1.1 Differentiation in Institutional Missions and Visions

One of the strongest impressions to emerge from the 2002 Audit Reports is the marked diversity of the HE sector. Despite some opinions to the contrary, the institutions in question are not trying to be all things to all people, but show significant differentiation – and not merely in age, location and size.

Individuality and focus are sometimes reflected explicitly in mission statements and, more frequently, implicitly in the way that the institutions approach their core activities. The reports identify and highlight key points of differentiation among the institutions, for example:

- The Australian Catholic University's Catholic and national mission
- The Australian Maritime College's specialised maritime focus
- The University of Ballarat's service to first-generation students in its catchment region
- The University of Newcastle's commitment to problem-based learning
- Swinburne University of Technology's commitment to entrepreneurship and industry-based learning
- The University of Southern Queensland's strength in innovative program delivery

Two institutions received specific commendations related to the distinctive roles they play; others were commended for activities that support their corporate vision. Only one Audit Report recommended that the institution reflect upon the alignment between its future plans and its historical profile and strengths.

AUQA has been explicit in stating that its purpose is to judge institutions within the context of their own mission, and not to question the appropriateness of that mission. The reports were careful to maintain this approach and, wherever institutional documentation permitted, to set the discussion of particular aspects into the context of the relevant section of the institutional mission or goal statements. In the Agency's view, clear articulation of purpose and plan, and distinctiveness of approach, provide institutions with a firm basis on which to establish quality systems.

### 1.2 *Other Matters*

#### 1.2.1 The Legacies of Sector Reform

Different institutions are at different stages of development (obviously, given the differences in their ages), which makes any one-size-fits-all approach to quality systems inappropriate. Two in

particular are only just establishing their identities as single, independent, self-accrediting institutions, and are facing early-career challenges with respect to QA. At the other end of the spectrum, the mere fact of having old stones does not translate to smooth sailing with respect to quality systems: the oldest of the group is moving away from some of its earlier approaches, while newer institutions with historical roots in earlier configurations of the tertiary sector face challenges in bringing together disparate previous practices.

Institutional size would appear to be less of a factor in maintaining consistent quality systems than institutional reach and complexity. The need to manage across geographically dispersed campuses or multiple delivery modes raises particular challenges. Several institutions were cited for issues arising from their multi-campus (and often multi-national) nature. The difficulties of communicating across different sites and of ensuring equitable distribution of resources, parity of esteem and comparability of standards were highlighted. Likewise, dual-sector institutions and those involved in multi-sector partnerships faced particular quality issues.

### 1.2.2 The Impact of Continuous Improvement

The reports highlight significant and concerning levels of organisational instability among the institutions audited. Over half the institutions, in the lead up to the audit, had undergone fundamental restructuring, and/or changes of senior leadership, and/or externally imposed or self-imposed reviews, all of which appeared to have generated discontinuities in planning and, more pertinently, disrupted implementation.

Others were still in the process of bedding down earlier improvements, including the amalgamations of the early 1990s, which had sought to create unitary universities out of fundamentally different or geographically dispersed precursor institutions.

Evidence of the destabilising effect of continuing, fundamental change was visible throughout the reports. To the extent that good quality systems are based on 'closing the loop' between plans, their implementation, review and improvement, institutions caught in a continuous spiral of change will find it difficult to achieve closure in QA. It would appear from the 2002 audits that this is the case.

### 1.2.3 The Impact of AUQA

While much – if not all – of this spiral of change has been the result of state and Commonwealth policies and reforms, it is clear from the reports that the establishment of AUQA and its audit cycle has triggered a high level of pre-audit review activity across the sector. This has varied from whole-of-institution trial audits – sometimes externally facilitated – to more focused reviews of specific aspects of the institution and its activities such as research training, teaching and learning support, senior management, and organisational structures. Such self-scrutiny received commendation from AUQA, which particularly singled out for praise those University Councils that had instituted 'self-reflections' on their own processes.

The downside of these pre-audit activities, however, was the recognition during the audit process that the resulting improvements had either yet to be implemented or were too new to judge.

## 2 GOVERNANCE, LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATION

Underlying the Audit Reports is a clear view that institutional governance bodies (Councils, Academic and Faculty Boards) should take specific responsibility for monitoring institutional standards and performance with respect to mission and plans. The performance of these bodies was the subject of comment in most reports.

The audits show that, by and large, the institutions are well run. However, a small number of institutions were found to have real management problems, and it is perhaps this which gives rise to an impression that the task of managing today's complex, often overextended and continuously mutating institutions is only just feasible. AUQA clearly recognises the challenges inherent in leading today's large, complex institutions and the crucial role that senior leaders play in ensuring their institutions retain their focus and momentum. Communication and consistency across multi-campus, largely decentralised institutions are two key themes that emerge.

### 2.1 *Key Issues*

#### 2.1.1 The Proper Role of Councils

The role of University Councils has been under public scrutiny for some time, with Councils and state and Commonwealth governments reviewing and revising their expectations. From the evidence of the Audit Reports, this scrutiny has not been unmerited and has led to a level of soul searching with respect to the proper roles and responsibilities of institutional governance.

While the audit process identified a number of Councils with a demonstrated commitment to quality, there were cases of Councils appearing not to take sufficient interest in regular, systematic monitoring of institutional performance, and a few cases in which Councils appeared to be treading on or across the boundaries between governance and management.

Recommendations in half a dozen reports urge Councils to require the establishment of appropriate performance indicators and benchmarks and to ensure that systematic monitoring of performance against plans is cascaded from the highest level throughout the institutions.

There are also recommendations and observations as to whether the Councils' agendas and committees are structured to facilitate their monitoring and QA task. Two Councils were urged to reconsider and revise their committee structure.

Not all Councils appeared to be adequately informed about the nature of their university and its operations, and several were encouraged to take practical steps to address this such as through improved induction of members. One was recommended to go on retreat to study aspects of the university in greater detail.

#### 2.1.2 The Renewal of Academic Governance

Similarly, Academic Boards (known in some institutions as Academic Senates or by other names) seem to be at a crossroads in a number of institutions. While most were found to do an adequate job in course approvals and academic policy development, only one was cited as maintaining good monitoring of quality standards; several others were urged to address defects. Elsewhere, various gaps were identified in committee structures, and in the monitoring of policy implementation, academic standards and academic performance.

While several universities were commended for providing for broadly based input into planning and decision making, this appeared often to occur through mechanisms other than the traditional

Academic Board. While the reports do not take a position on the debate over managerial versus academic governance, it would appear that formal academic governance bodies have lost their way in many universities, at least with respect to academic QA.

Faculty Boards, their structure, role and relationship to Academic Boards also were seen to be in need of attention at several institutions.

### 2.1.3 Leadership and Leadership Development

The Audit Reports do not dwell in any detail on the specific roles of executive staff with respect to QA although the Vice-Chancellors of two institutions were commended for excellent internal communication and visibility. At least one other institution was praised for its frank discussion of management problems and their impact on the organisational climate.

A need for more systematic training and support for senior managers, particularly Deans and Heads of School, was identified at several institutions, primarily in the context of ensuring institution-wide adherence to plans and policies. 'Mandatory, co-ordinated training' and 'comprehensive support, based on a needs analysis' were recommended in a number of reports.

The position of Head of School came in for scrutiny in several reports, which address the demands and the inherent conflicts of the role.

### 2.1.4 Management, Organisation and Administration

The Audit Reports examined the constitution of the highest-level management and planning committee in each institution and, as might be expected, found considerable variation across the sector, albeit around a common theme involving some form of planning and budget committee chaired by the Vice-Chancellor. Most appear to be constituted in a way that ensures appropriate expertise, and additional mechanisms for consultation and stakeholder input are present in many institutions.

## 2.2 *Other Matters*

### 2.2.1 Devolution, Decentralisation and Locus of Accountability

Less attention is paid in the reports to discussing the organisational structure of the institutions, except in those cases where it appears to be giving rise to discontinuities in the quality system. In those institutions that were undergoing or had recently undergone reorganisation, the Audit Panels found evidence of confusion about who was responsible for what, of gaps in coverage of management portfolios, and of inconsistencies in quality practices.

Running through the reports is a thread of criticism of the consequences of the institutional decentralisation that became characteristic in the wake of the amalgamations of the 1990s, which led to the creation of extremely large, often far-flung institutions. While, on the one hand, several reports encourage the Executive to ensure that Deans and Heads of School have the necessary tools and training to do their jobs (for example, by devolving greater budget authority to the Faculties), the reports repeatedly highlight examples of ways in which devolution has led to problems with QA. Inconsistent policies or implementation of policies, poor communication of plans, and confusion over roles, responsibilities and accountabilities are apparent in most of the institutions.

### 3 PLANNING, POLICY AND BUDGET DEVELOPMENT

All the institutions in the group have strategic plans although the form they take and the time frame they cover vary considerably. Deficiencies in planning were widely identified. Most relate to the integration of different levels of planning and the alignment of plans and resources. In a few cases, the planning model adopted was not felt to be sufficiently rigorous or comprehensive, and the institutions were encouraged to reshape their plans to ensure priorities, time lines and milestones were clear, and widely disseminated.

On the other hand, policy development, particularly the development of academic policies, is generally solid across the institutions although communication was found to be problematic. Given the organisational complexity of most of the institutions, it is not surprising that panels found problems with the implementation of plans and policies.

#### 3.1 *Key Issues*

##### 3.1.1 Strategic Planning: Integration and Implementation of Plans

It appears from the reports that most institutions do not yet have a robust, fully developed strategic planning process in place. Areas for comment include the integration of strategic planning and budgeting; the vertical and horizontal alignment of planning within the institutions; and the monitoring of compliance with institutional plans, policies and directions. In total, some 20 recommendations were addressed to the need to improve aspects of strategic planning and related matters.

Lack of alignment between the corporate plans and lower level (faculty and administrative unit) plans was common, often compounded by inter-campus differences. Five of the eight institutions were urged to improve the alignment of plans from one level to the next and to ensure consistency across units and locations in order fully to realise the institutions' missions. The reports suggest ways of improving implementation of the plans such as better prioritisation, the use of a project management approach, and clarification of locus of responsibility for particular strategies and objectives. Mechanisms for monitoring compliance were often wanting and, as noted above, the role of key governance committees with respect to monitoring performance against plans was not always being fulfilled.

As with institutional missions, it is not AUQA's purpose to critique the plans per se, but rather to examine the extent to which the institution is operating within the goals it has set for itself, and monitoring its progress with respect to them. While the audits identified many specific areas in which improvements could be made, there were only two instances in which the report questioned whether the institution's own actions were consistent with its stated plans. Apart from these, and taking into account the general sense that institutional planning could bear improvement, it appears that overall the institutions are articulating and adhering to their plans.

##### 3.1.2 Finance and Budget Linked to Plans

Institutional finances are not clearly linked to planning priorities in many institutions. The reports identified instances of a lack of explicit budget provision for planned projects, insufficient flow-through of funds to operational areas responsible for implementing plans, and apparent mismatch between the priority and the resources allocated to particular areas or activities. One institution was urged to align its budget processes to its strategic directions and to consider improved structures for strengthening financial accountability. Another was encouraged to investigate ways of using its budget to induce organisational units to address corporate planning goals; for example, through the use of performance-based budgets and financial incentives.

### 3.1.3 Policy Development and Dissemination

As with planning, the Audit Panels found that in general the institutions have, or are putting into place, the policies necessary to support their values, maintain standards and ensure effective operations. Several institutions were praised for their systematic approach to policy development and, in particular, for having mechanisms to ensure input from stakeholder groups. In the main, it appears that Academic Boards are doing a solid job in developing and approving academic policies. Where weaknesses were identified, they generally related to whether there were processes in place to ensure that specific policies reflected national or international good practice. One institution was cited for excessive detail and complexity in its policies.

The audits, however, found fairly widespread problems with the dissemination and implementation of the policies, again exacerbated by multi-site operations and by decentralisation. Not all institutions have robust systems in place for ensuring that staff and students are aware of and understand the need to comply with institutional policies, and there has been a tendency for local policies and practices to supplant them. Institutions were urged to strengthen the role of senior leaders (most commonly, Heads of School) and of Academic and Faculty Boards in disseminating policy and ensuring its implementation.

### 3.1.4 Communication of Plans and Goals

The reports' findings about gaps in the implementation of plans and policies across the institutions are evidence of problems in internal communications, highlighting the difficulty of achieving shared understanding across large, heterogeneous institutions with geographically dispersed activities. Most of the institutions were encouraged either to put into place or to further develop their university-wide communication strategies, and a range of formal and informal means for doing so were suggested. In a few instances, the need to include provision for consultation and feedback from staff and students was stressed but, in general, the audits found that the institutions have adequate consultative mechanisms in place.

## 3.2 *Other Matters*

### 3.2.1 Budget Models and Management

The audits provided insight into the range of budget models in use across this group of institutions although they eschew commenting on their appropriateness. Variants on formula-driven 'relative funding models' and 'historical-plus-increment' models are the most common although a number of institutions also make use of strategic pools or performance-based funding, most commonly at the budget-centre level. At least one institution was engaged in a budget-reform process, and most provided for at least some measure of stakeholder input into framing the budget.

Budget management issues identified included lack of transparency and unclear locus of budget authority, as well as the need to strengthen links between budget, planning and accountability. It was noted that several of the institutions were operating in cash deficit at the time of the audit.

### 3.2.2 Risk Management

It appears that most institutions have risk management under control. Only one institution was encouraged to improve its risk management processes generally although specific areas where risk management could be tightened, such as partnered off-shore activities, were identified at several other institutions.

## 4 QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The Audit Reports show evidence of an emerging sophistication of QA systems in the sector. The Audit Panels found significant self-review activity and evidence of quality improvement processes. They identified room for improvement in the integration of QA and planning and especially in the systematic use of performance indicators and external benchmarks to measure and monitor progress.

### 4.1 *Key Issues*

#### 4.1.1 Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

The institutions in the 2002 audit group all have in place a reasonably comprehensive set of QA practices, ranging from internal review processes to ISO certification, and several are commended for their commitment to quality. Although overall co-ordination of QA and its integration into planning are yet to be perfected at any institution, most are working hard to ensure that QA practices are identified, documented and integrated into a comprehensive system. Ensuring that all areas of the institution are engaged in QA and that appropriate monitoring occurs is proving difficult, and the reports make a number of recommendations for ways of improving this.

Quality enhancement systems are less well understood and certainly less formalised in the institutions although a number are establishing internal improvement processes, generally reflecting an Approach-Deployment-Results-Improvement quality cycle approach (see 'Abbreviations and Acronyms'). Institutions were urged by AUQA to continue in this direction, with special attention to making sure that all parts of the institution were involved and that the feedback loop was in place.

#### 4.1.2 Self-reviews and External Reviews

The extent of institutional self-review, either in response to identified needs or in preparation for the AUQA visit, has been noted above, and is the subject of commendation at six institutions.

Systematic, cyclical quality reviews of specific aspects of institutional operation (such as school or course reviews) as well as ad hoc reviews of particular activities (such as research training or international operations) appear to be fairly well established in most of this group of institutions. The audits, nevertheless, found that these processes could be improved. Some were not sufficiently comprehensive, were focused more on processes than on outcomes, lacked an empirical approach or failed to make provision for external input.

#### 4.1.3 Performance Indicators and Benchmarks

As noted earlier, the institutions generally have not yet fully bedded down monitoring of their quality processes, in particular, monitoring at Council and Academic Board levels. Only one was commended for having in place a methodology – based on a balanced scorecard approach – that establishes formal feedback loops between its performance goals and its actual performance.

This situation was exacerbated, in AUQA's view, by a lack of appropriate internal and external metrics against which to judge performance. Although the institutions are striving to establish what one termed 'a culture of evidence' to underpin planning and quality cycles, it appears from the reports that the task is a slow and laborious one. Six of the eight reports included recommendations concerning the further development of appropriate performance measures.

Outside the research portfolio and some administrative and support areas, benchmarking was found to be uniformly weak, and reference to external comparators inconsistent. Five institutions were urged to identify appropriate national and international benchmarking partners and others were cautioned about the need for hard data to substantiate claims about national pre-eminence or world-class performance.

Institutional performance data are more widely in use than external comparators, perhaps because of long familiarity with Commonwealth reporting requirements. There is, nevertheless, room for improvement, and two institutions were encouraged to ensure that their performance indicators were more clearly defined and measurable, and that they included output as well as input measures.

## **4.2 *Other Matters***

### **4.2.1 Management Information Systems**

As the sector moves towards being more evidence-driven in its planning and quality management, a number of institutions have been putting into place management information systems. The Audit Visits found several examples of improved planning thanks to these systems, and commended several institutions on their recognition of the importance of having robust and reliable data. A proper institutional research capability is beginning to emerge in a few institutions.

### **4.2.2 Accuracy of Information**

While most of the attention of the audits is to matters of internal communication and information flow, there are a few instances where the reports comment on the institutions' external communication. The need to attend to accuracy of information in handbooks and in marketing materials was flagged at two institutions.

## 5 TEACHING AND LEARNING

QA practices for teaching and learning appear to be well developed and generally sound. The audits sampled a number of key control points and, while they found some weak areas, they also identified a number of examples of good and distinctive practice. The main areas of concern revolved around evaluation of curricula during review and accreditation processes; provision for student evaluation of units and teaching; and a lack of uniform standards across departments/schools, campuses, and local and off-shore activities.

### 5.1 *Key Issues*

#### 5.1.1 External Input into Curriculum

Several institutions were commended for having in place structures to enable external input into curriculum design and, in some instances, into curriculum approval and review. The use of external advisory boards is quite widespread, and seen to assist the institutions to maintain the relevance of their courses.

#### 5.1.2 Accreditation, Review and Reaccreditation of Programs

Formal course accreditation processes are in place in all the institutions, but are considered by both the panels and the institutions to need strengthening in one or more aspects. Indeed, several institutions were reviewing their procedures at the time of the audit. Some of the concerns identified by the audits were essentially procedural: accountabilities were unclear, turnaround too slow. Others were more clearly quality related. Several institutions were encouraged to review their accreditation criteria and processes and to benchmark them against other universities to ensure that they were maintaining standards. One was urged to look at reducing the length of the accreditation period in order to keep courses current.

Course review and re-accreditation processes showed variation among institutions. Often a feedback loop, in the form, for example, of annual course reports to the Academic Board, was not present or was being observed in the breach. Not all institutions have comprehensive course review or reaccreditation requirements.

External accreditation of courses by professional bodies was common and helpful in maintaining standards, but was not seen by AUQA as an acceptable replacement for a robust in-house process.

#### 5.1.3 Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units

All the institutions in this audit round have systems in place for student evaluation of units and, in some cases, of teaching. Existing practices came in for a measure of criticism, however, and five institutions were recommended to review and upgrade their current practices. Inconsistent implementation across the institution is the most common failing, together with the need to ensure that the results are monitored, improvements made and students informed of the outcomes. Where student evaluations also extend to teaching, the results are commonly confidential and not necessarily fed back into staff appraisal and development processes.

#### 5.1.4 Graduate Attributes

The audit sampling process picks out the teaching of generic skills or graduate attributes for particular attention. Reflecting the policies of an earlier incarnation of the Department of Education, Science and Training, most of the institutions have some formal statement about the skills they aim to instil but are labouring to devise a means of ensuring that this occurs. One

institution was commended for its explicit attention to graduate attributes; at least three institutions were seen to be fumbling the implementation of their policies.

#### 5.1.5 Flexible, Online and Distance Teaching

Forms of off-campus teaching, whether called distance education, flexible learning or online learning, are now widespread among the institutions, including those which do not have a distinctive distance education mission. Much institutional effort is currently focused on developing flexible delivery modes and, in particular, online capabilities. A number of the Audit Reports make specific recommendations on improvements in this area, without any particular focus emerging, apart from a need to ensure overall co-ordination of developments and parity of standards across different modes of delivery.

#### 5.1.6 Dual-sector Issues, Vocational Education and Training Interface, Articulation

Considerable public attention has been focused in the past few years on the interface between vocational and higher education. There is government interest, especially at state level, in strengthening inter-sectoral collaborations and pathways between vocational and higher education. The Audit Reports highlight a growing number of examples of successful practice in this area; at the same time they note the challenges that collaborations, such as joint ventures between a university and a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institute, can pose for QA.

The three dual-sector institutions in the audit group attracted comment with respect to the integration, or potential for integration, between vocational education and training and higher education programs. Concern was expressed about the need to take more explicit account of the differing approaches to curriculum, teaching and learning in the two sectors.

#### 5.1.7 Ensuring Consistent Standards

A theme that runs throughout the teaching and learning sections of the Audit Reports is the importance of ensuring comparability of standards across units, campuses and teaching modes within the institution, as well as externally – between the institution and its national and international peers. Two institutions were urged to establish processes and criteria for doing this, and two others were alerted to the need to address cross-campus variances in assessment and course rules. The reports are generally low-key in their treatment of the standards issue given that their focus is on QA processes rather than on substantive performance reviews.

### 5.2 *Other Matters*

#### 5.2.1 Teaching and Learning Plans and Policies

Most of the institutions either have or are developing teaching and learning management plans and, for the most part, appeared at the time of audit to be following them successfully. Several institutions were criticised for making statements about their educational philosophy that they were not able to demonstrate or even define for the Audit Panel; for example, with respect to the purported nexus between teaching and research.

Staff and student knowledge of, and compliance with, academic policies were identified as problem areas in several institutions. Factors seen to be affecting this included the size and geographical dispersion of the institution, insufficient attention from the Academic Board or senior managers, and deficiencies in staff induction and professional development (especially with respect to off-shore staff).

### 5.2.2 Pedagogy

A number of examples of local good practice were identified. Two of the universities were commended for espousing particular approaches to teaching and learning. However, in the main, there was comparatively little attention paid to pedagogy in the Audit Reports.

### 5.2.3 Support for Teaching and Learning

Support for teaching and teaching development is commonly provided through specialist units and also through intra-institutional collaborative projects, which were commended by AUQA. The institutions' teaching support units received praise for their work in assisting teaching staff to keep up to date and, in particular, to adopt new technologies.

### 5.2.4 Assessment and Moderation Standards

The Audit Reports are reassuring as to the existence of appropriate assessment policies and processes in all institutions although it was found that more systematic monitoring of the results by Academic Boards could be instituted. There is mention in several reports about the role of consistent assessment practices in ensuring standards, and one institution was commended for its attention to this. One report recommended that the institution undertake evaluative studies of student performance to inform its strategic decision making, and there was reference to monitoring the performance of international students in one or two reports. Several reports make observations about examples of good practice; for example, the use of moderation in cross-campus programs or of academics from other institutions for sample cross-marking.

## 6 RESEARCH AND RESEARCH TRAINING

Research is an area characterised by national standard setting and a long history of effective consultation and collaboration among members of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor/Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research) group. Major audit themes (apart from the obvious inter-institutional differences) related to research planning, management and measurement; supervision of research students; and the role of research centres. A few anomalies with respect to the monitoring of research ethics or the equitable provision of research support were cited. The efforts of the newer institutions to develop and embed a culture of research were well documented, as was the bootstrap nature of that process. The difficulties most institutions were facing in the provision of the necessary infrastructure – and particularly library resources – to support research were highlighted.

### 6.1 *Key Issues*

#### 6.1.1 Improved Research Performance

Of the universities in the 2002 audit group, only one presents as research intensive, with strong performance across key indicators; one or two others were commended for strong leadership in specified research fields. The others – younger and, in several cases, dual-sector institutions – were seen to be at various stages of capacity building. All were found to have areas of strength or potential strength.

The weight of commendation in the audits therefore is directed toward recognition of the progress made by the institutions in improving their research performance. A number of instances of good practice were identified; for example, efforts to upgrade staff qualifications and to instil a research ethos into formerly teaching-only institutions.

#### 6.1.2 Research Planning, Policies and Management

The research area benefits from the existence of nationally accepted performance indicators, benchmarks and shared practices, and most institutions were seen by AUQA to be finding their own level and performing soundly with respect to planning, management and QA in research.

All the dual-sector institutions were encouraged to take steps to clarify and refine their research objectives within the context of their strategic planning and to ensure that staff had a better understanding of what was expected of them.

One institution received four recommendations aimed at strengthening the way in which it manages and supports research; three institutions were urged to upgrade specific research management positions, either to respond to perceived workload problems or to provide a focus of expertise in a particular area.

#### 6.1.3 Higher Degree Supervision and Supervisors

Research training, like research, enjoys varying levels of activity across the institutions in the audit group, but no serious problem areas emerged. (The Audit Panels eschewed comment on the not inconsiderable difficulties that institutions have been experiencing due to changes in government funding policies.) Several institutions were encouraged to strengthen their research-training activity, but only one was found to lack focus and to have deficiencies in entry standards and assessment systems.

A number of recommendations are focused on strengthening research supervision, with four institutions urged to upgrade and benchmark their practices. Problems identified cover the need to

have clear criteria for the selection of supervisors, a clear and simple role statement for them, better training for supervisors, monitoring of their performance, and a process for deregistering supervisors who are not meeting their role expectations.

The move by a number of universities towards co-supervision was noted positively.

#### 6.1.4 Monitoring Progress of Research Students

The audits found weaknesses in the implementation of policies relating to monitoring the progress of research students. Several institutions require annual reports but are not ensuring that they are forthcoming, and it was recommended that this be attended to.

The practice of using external examiners for higher degree theses is widespread and was positively noted by AUQA.

#### 6.1.5 Research Student Support

Research students to whom Audit Panels spoke were positive about their experiences, and the reports found that in general they were well supported. The students' main desire was for more structured opportunities for interdisciplinary and cross-campus interaction with their peers.

#### 6.1.6 Nexus Between Research and Teaching

A number of institutions, and particularly those that have a strong history in undergraduate education, included statements in their Performance Portfolios about their research informing their teaching. The Audit Panels followed up on these claims, asking to be shown examples of this research-teaching nexus. As a result, AUQA recommended that three of the universities take steps to ensure that their aspirations in this regard were more clearly articulated to staff and that their teaching and learning and research management plans clarified the intended linkages and identified strategies for strengthening them.

### 6.2 *Other Matters*

#### 6.2.1 Research Centres and Institutes

The Audit Panels looked at research centres and institutes where these existed; while generally they commented favourably on them, they made several recommendations about the need for policies to clarify their role (especially with respect to research training and advisory boards). They also identified a need to provide for external review and for the potential disestablishment of non-performing centres. Overall, the reports found that the research centres were effective in supporting and focusing research activities.

#### 6.2.2 Ethics and Safety

Policies and procedures relating to research ethics approvals and biosafety were found to be adequate in all but one institution, and two were commended for the robustness of their approach.

#### 6.2.3 Research Culture and Concentration

The Audit Reports contain conflicting sets of recommendations touching on research concentration, in which most institutions are engaging to a greater or lesser extent. In some institutions, the push to concentrate research in a restricted number of areas, and to base research in identified centres, was seen by the Audit Panels to be worthy of commendation. But, in others, concerns were expressed about the dampening impact of such policies on staff wanting to do research in other fields, and about the skewing of research profiles towards science and technology fields. Areas of particular concern included the encouragement of research in the humanities and social sciences and, especially, the ability of institutions to capitalise on staff

capacity for research into teaching practice. The reports did not find significant organisational impediments to interdisciplinary research in the institutions.

#### 6.2.4 Research Infrastructure

The provision of adequate and appropriate infrastructure for research and research training was explored in passing, with comment made where exceptional facilities or strong infrastructure provisions existed. In a number of cases, however, library resources were felt to be inadequate to support the institutions' research and research training aspirations.

## 7 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The interface of the institutions with their external community, variously described in terms of 'service', 'engagement', or 'partnerships', is traditionally one of the three core concerns of universities. Different institutions handle differently the matter of external relations with the communities or constituencies they serve. For some institutions, it is a key focus and a defining part of their mission and founding legislation. For some, it is one of a number of strong aspects of their identity. For others, the community is simply contextual. Community engagement was considerably less thoroughly covered in the Audit Reports than were teaching and research, however, perhaps because it is an area in which QA systems are difficult to construct and therefore difficult for AUQA to assess.

### 7.1 *Key Issues*

#### 7.1.1 Partnerships and Linkages

The audits found that the institutions' engagement with the community often revolved around particular initiatives such as the establishment of research parks or campus-based learning or cultural activities. These are generally, but not always, entrepreneurial in nature. Collaboration with industry or with other educational providers – generally through strategic alliances with local TAFE institutes – was commended at several institutions.

### 7.2 *Other Matters*

#### 7.2.1 Community Relations and Support

Those reports that commented on the 'town/gown' interface found that the institutions had good relations with their communities, and often strong support. Several were praised for their commitment to serving local or regional constituencies. There was some evidence that the value of community support was not always recognised by the institutions, which do not capitalise on their public reputation. In one instance, an institution was criticised by AUQA for not taking sufficient account of external perceptions of the institution's strengths and weaknesses in its planning. Another was felt to be missing opportunities by not capitalising on its location.

#### 7.2.2 Leadership

While the audits found evidence of numerous examples of institutional-level community relations activities, few institutions had clear organisational structures to provide leadership for their community interface. Most commonly, individual staff take the lead in external engagement such as through the provision of expert opinions in the media.

#### 7.2.3 Alumni

Outreach to alumni was viewed by the Audit Reports as one aspect of community engagement. At the time of audit, a few institutions were reviewing and strengthening their activities in this regard.

## 8 STUDENTS

Student needs and interests appeared in the reports under a number of guises but were the subject of a separate section in only four. AUQA generally had praise for student support services, particularly for provision for Indigenous and international students. Likewise, it found good practice with respect to student involvement in institutional decision making and procedures for handling grievances and appeals. The Audit Panels reported that students were positive about their educational experience.

### 8.1 *Key Issues*

#### 8.1.1 Support Services

Student support services are, in the main, mentioned only briefly in the reports, generally among the commendations. A number of instances of good practice in the provision of academic and personal support were identified. One institution was urged to undertake a comprehensive review of its systems for assisting students with problems and grievances; another, at the time of the audit, was partway through a comprehensive review aimed at improving its student support services. Another was commended for its 'rich, well co-ordinated, supportive learning environment created by student services'. Specialist services for international students received more attention than student services generally. The question of over-servicing students and creating dependence rather than independence was discussed in one report.

#### 8.1.2 Indigenous Students

The Audit Panels specifically examined how well the institutions were catering to the needs of Indigenous students. The results were uniformly positive, with several areas of good practice noted. Two institutions were commended for their thorough attention to Indigenous matters, and two others were encouraged to consider ways to provide university-level leadership and co-ordination to support the implementation of their Indigenous education plans.

### 8.2 *Other Matters*

#### 8.2.1 Student Profile and Recruitment

Most of the Audit Reports comment in passing on the institutions' student profile, noting, for example, its diversity, the presence of designated equity groups or of significant numbers of off-campus students. Two institutions were commended for their outreach to specific student populations.

#### 8.2.2 Student Satisfaction and Experience

The issues of student evaluation of teaching and institutional performance on the Course Experience Questionnaire were canvassed, and several institutions were found to be wanting in the consistent and uniform provision of structured opportunities for student feedback. Nevertheless, AUQA's audit sampling suggests that student satisfaction is generally high across all institutions in the audit round. Several institutions had in place or were contemplating introducing more broadly based student experience questionnaires to provide timely feedback on student perceptions.

#### 8.2.3 Communication and Involvement

Communication between staff and students was generally found to be good. Communication at the institutional level is more problematic, particularly with respect to ensuring an understanding

of the institution's mission and values and policies affecting students, including key documents such as the Student Charter. In most institutions, however, provision for student involvement in planning and decision making is made and taken up, and there is evidence of a desire further to improve such involvement.

#### 8.2.4 Student Progress, Appeals and Grievances

The Audit Panels appear to have satisfied themselves that appropriate mechanisms were in place to deal with the review of student progress, and with appeals and grievances. In a few instances they found inconsistent practices or organisational problems, but in only one instance were they sufficiently concerned to develop a recommendation for improved practice.

## 9 STAFF

Overall, the auditors found committed, positive and engaged staff at the institutions they visited. The auditees are at different stages with respect to human resource planning and management. AUQA uncovered opportunities for improvement in human resource practices at several institutions but found generally sound approaches in most. The Audit Panels focused on strengthening the provision of induction (for new staff and for partner staff) and opportunities for professional development. Performance management was also addressed where it was felt to be lacking.

### 9.1 *Key Issues*

#### 9.1.1 Planning, Leadership and Policy

The audit findings are mixed with respect to the institutions' performance in human resources administration. Most institutions were seen to be doing a good job, but a few appeared to have significant leadership and management problems. Those institutions which had, or were in the process of instituting, a comprehensive staff management plan and suite of policies were commended. At least two institutions were urged to take immediate action to deal with current major deficiencies and ensure timely implementation of needed reforms; others were encouraged to address specific issues such as strategic workforce planning.

#### 9.1.2 Appointment and Induction

Processes for the appointment of staff occasioned little comment from AUQA. However, induction of new staff, particularly with respect to teaching practice, was found to be problematic in a number of institutions. Three institutions were urged to develop or improve their induction programs; to ensure that the induction programs were aligned to staffing objectives; and to ensure that they were systematic, consistent and probably compulsory. A more systematic and consistent approach to probation was called for in one instance.

#### 9.1.3 Professional Development

Improvements to staff training and development were likewise seen to be needed at a number of institutions, with particular focus on teaching staff and on those in leadership positions. Institutions were urged to assess the effectiveness of their current professional development offerings and their alignment to institutional needs, and to identify and address training gaps. The problem of actually getting staff to take up professional development opportunities was acknowledged. The provision of various forms of study leave was noted with approval. The contributions of staff in teaching support units were generally found to be widely appreciated.

#### 9.1.4 Performance Appraisal

This is clearly an area for improvement in a number of institutions. One university was commended for the development of a comprehensive performance appraisal initiative, which was still in trial stage at the time of audit. Others have systems in place, but the audits found either that they were not being consistently implemented, that the information obtained was not being effectively monitored, or that a review of the approach was in order. Several were in the process of implementing performance management policies and were urged to get on with it. As in a number of other areas of QA, the feedback loop from performance review to performance improvement has not been well and consistently established in those institutions audited, and although the panels found anecdotal evidence of improvement, this was not being systematically reported.

## **9.2 *Other Matters***

### **9.2.1 Staff Satisfaction and Commitment**

The picture of the HE workforce that emerges from the reports is considerably brighter than that painted by recent national reports on the staffing situation in HE. Only one or two institutions were noted as having problems of staff morale and/or difficulties in communication between staff and management. A small number of institutions were found to be using staff satisfaction surveys, and examining the results against national benchmarks.

### **9.2.2 Promotion, Awards and Rewards**

Limited mention is made in the reports of promotion practices and policies although those that are noted do not attract negative comment. Most institutions have in place additional systems to recognise staff achievement, most commonly through a series of awards such as the Vice-Chancellor's Excellent Teaching Award. Staff generally appreciate such programs.

### **9.2.3 Workload Management**

Workload concerns were cited by AUQA at only a few institutions, mostly with respect to particular areas of academic endeavour such as research supervision. Institutions were urged to develop guidelines for managing staff workload, to tailor the guidelines to suit the particular circumstances of individual courses and disciplines, and to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the guidelines.

## 10 INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

International students and the off-shore activities of universities were much in the news throughout 2002. It is not therefore surprising that particular attention was paid to international programs in the 2002 round of audits. Onshore provision was found to be solid. The influence of strong legislative controls (Education Services for Overseas Students Act) and of national standards and guidelines (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee's Code of Good Practice) appears to be working to help the institutions maintain high standards with respect to their handling of international students. However, QA for off-shore programs needs strengthening, and is already the subject of attention at most institutions. Despite an evident need for tightening up, and one or two examples of lax practice, there is, however, no overriding sense emerging from the Audit Reports of significant poor practice across the sector.

### 10.1 *Key Issues*

#### 10.1.1 Quality Assurance for Partnered and Offshore Activities

With respect to off-shore activities, the audit results are mixed. One institution received strong commendation for its systematic and thorough approach to assuring the quality of international programs. Another's stated commitment to not compromising its standards was praised. Most institutions, however, were found to have – and already to be addressing – deficiencies in their off-shore quality activities. These reflect, in the main, subsets of larger areas of difficulty in the institutions such as insufficient data on student performance generally, inconsistent implementation of accreditation policies and practices, and lack of external review procedures. Three institutions were exhorted to establish more robust QA systems generally for off-shore activities, taking into account their specific needs; others displayed both strengths and weaknesses of approach.

Members of Audit Panels visited off-shore campuses of three of the institutions; telephone interviews with overseas partners were conducted at a fourth.

#### 10.1.2 Consistency of Standards, Assessment and Curriculum

One specific area in which AUQA considers that the institutions need to exercise better quality control is in maintaining consistency of academic standards and quality of teaching and support between off-shore and on-campus programs. The audit process did not uncover significant discrepancies or, with one exception, gaps in practice, but rather found that further tightening of controls would be beneficial.

Improved support for and communication with staff teaching at off-shore campuses (whether they are Australian staff who are visiting or are locals) were stressed. Centrally co-ordinated induction was suggested with a view to ensuring that members of staff were clear about their responsibilities for teaching, curriculum development and evaluation and about policy expectations. Institutions were encouraged more systematically to monitor the performance of domestic and off-shore student cohorts so as to ensure that learning outcomes were comparable. Generally, though, the audits found sound approaches to assuring standards of assessment and of curriculum. Only one instance was found in which accreditation processes had not been adhered to for an off-shore program, and the institution was rectifying the lapse.

One report raised what is likely to be a risk management sleeper for the system: the ability of the institutions to put into place effective QA measures for off-shore and partnered programs that provide teaching and assessment in languages other than English.

## **10.2 Other Matters**

### **10.2.1 Support for Onshore International Students**

All the institutions audited enrol fee-paying international students in their on-campus programs in Australia although the Audit Panels found that there was a considerable range of practice in the ways in which support was made available to such students. While some minor issues surfaced, the audits found good levels of academic, linguistic and social support for international students. The students were found to be generally positive about their institutions. Two institutions were recognised for the success of their recruitment efforts.

The provision of accurate information on courses and the adequacy of English language support were touched on in several reports. There were one or two instances in which the institutions were urged to provide students and prospective students with more accurate information about the accreditation of courses by the relevant professional body, both in Australia and in their home countries.

### **10.2.2 Management of Partnered Activities**

The audits found weaknesses in the management of partnered on- and off-shore programs for international students. These are essentially commercial relationships, and AUQA urges more comprehensive due diligence in the selection of agents and partners; stronger contractual arrangements, including tighter controls in key areas and explicit provision for review prior to re-signing; more effective communication systems; and more robust monitoring to ensure that the off-shore providers are fully compliant with the terms and conditions of the agreement. One particular problem area was in the interface with agents representing institutions off-shore.

### **10.2.3 Internationalising the Curriculum**

Although a number of institutions include internationalisation and, specifically, internationalisation of the curriculum in their institutional value statements and plans, the Audit Visits found uneven levels of understanding among staff and students at some institutions as to what this meant for them. Others appeared to be making headway in incorporating international perspectives, case studies, and so on into at least some of their courses.

## **11 ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITIES**

Although only one of the institutions includes a commitment to entrepreneurship in its statement of mission, AUQA found that most were successfully engaged in entrepreneurial and commercial activities variously covering research and teaching. A number have commercial arms, and one was commended for the operations of its subsidiary company. The implications of such entities and activities for institutional QA were not widely canvassed in this group of audits – despite their recent prominence in government and media debate.

### **11.1 Key Issues**

#### **11.1.1 Commercialisation of Research and Intellectual Property**

The commercialisation of research was noted in several Audit Reports, with two institutions singled out for commendation for the creation of successful research parks. The involvement of others in Cooperative Research Centres was positively noted. A need to clarify the difference between research and consultancy was highlighted at one institution. Processes for the management of tenders, contracts and intellectual property (IP) matters most frequently appear to be handled by the research management offices of the institutions. There was one instance in which the audit found that an institution's IP policies required attention.

#### **11.1.2 Commercialisation of Teaching**

In addition to provision of partnered programs for international students, a number of institutions engage in commercial teaching activities aimed at the domestic lifelong learning market. These are frequently run on a contract basis and managed by the institution's commercial arm. Typically, these are non-credit training programs, but they also include award courses tailored to the needs of particular clients. The Audit Panels found some areas of concern about standards and the management of such programs at four institutions. Issues included ensuring that appropriate academic standards, including assessment standards and teaching practices, are maintained and monitored; for example, through monitoring of the progress of student cohorts. Due diligence when entering into partnerships and the need to ensure rigorous QA for these activities were cited among the management weaknesses.

### **11.2 Other Matters**

#### **11.2.1 Plans, Policies and Management of Entrepreneurial Activities**

It is not clear from the Audit Reports to what extent the institutions have plans and policies in place to assist them to manage and oversee the quality of their entrepreneurial activities and, importantly, to ensure that these do not in any way detract from their mainstream operations. Risk management strategies and outside work policies come to mind. One Audit Panel found that the practice of contracting faculty staff to teach in the institution's commercial arm was causing problems and urged that both the matter of equitable access to such opportunities and potential conflicts of interest be considered. Another found confusion among staff as to what was expected of them to support the institution's stated commitment to entrepreneurship.

## 12 INFRASTRUCTURE

AUQA is clearly sensitive to the strained resource capabilities of the institutions, and the reports are selective in their examination of infrastructure issues. The Audit Panels looked systematically at libraries and information technology (IT) resources across the institutions. Libraries were mostly praised for their responsiveness to staff and student needs. The adequacy of the library collections to support research and research training was questioned at several institutions, and the provision of library services to off-shore students was also cited as a problem area. There are similar, but fewer, observations about the IT infrastructure to support both academic and administrative needs.

### 12.1 *Key Issues*

#### 12.1.1 Libraries

The reports provide a mixed picture of the libraries of the institutions audited. All are feeling the effects of shrinking budgets and rising costs of monographs and periodicals, and most are working hard to ensure that their collections are adequate to support teaching and research needs. Several are falling short and the audits highlight gaps between the research aspirations of several institutions and their library research collections. Several are also having difficulty meeting the library needs of off-campus and off-shore students. The libraries are at different stages of development with respect to the use of IT, with most quite well advanced.

Librarians have been at the forefront of establishing consortial arrangements nationally, such as the Council for Australian University Libraries (CAUL), to facilitate benchmarking and quality improvement, and locally, such as the Cooperative Action by Victorian Academic Libraries (CAVAL), to help individual institutions to manage the budget squeeze. Not all libraries appear to be taking full advantage of such collaborations, however. Library management and service standards appear to vary quite considerably across the institutions audited: the library is a jewel in the crown at some, but at others appears to be marking time. Four Audit Reports recommended action to improve library performance.

#### 12.1.2 Information Technology

The Audit Panels found that institutions were making major investments in IT infrastructure to support teaching and learning. Comments on the implementation of various instructional management systems, and on technologies to support online learning, indicate that uptake by staff and students is, however, variable.

#### 12.1.3 Information Systems, Registers and Records

Institutions are also working hard to upgrade their administrative information systems. Four of the eight reports commended the institution for improvements in this area, including new student record systems, electronic systems to support course and policy information, and management information systems to support planning and decision making.

### 12.2 *Other Matters*

#### 12.2.1 Administration and Service Levels

There is only occasional reference in the reports to administrative services more generally. Tools such as ISO certification, participation in national benchmarking, and the use of internal service level agreements and of client satisfaction surveys appear to be increasingly common in the sector, but unevenly taken up – even within a single institution.

### 12.2.2 Facilities, Buildings and Grounds

Few of the Audit Reports speak to the matter of the physical facilities provided by the institution. The physical plant and research facilities received favourable mention at one university, as did another's commitment to environmental sustainability in campus development.

## 13 CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the Audit Reports do not show any single, consistent black hole in the key academic standards of the SAI sector. In the main, the picture that emerges is of committed staff and contented 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 is variation in the strength of institutional management and infrastructure to support academic activities, and the extent to which the institutions are stretched is apparent.

It can be surmised from the reports that most of the institutions had introduced a variety of review and redefinition exercises in anticipation of the audit. The panels found ample opportunity to recognise newly initiated QA processes and to encourage the institutions to continue to pursue them. In only a few instances did one have the impression that the institution might not have moved to set its house in order with such alacrity without the external impetus. For one or two, the audit seemed to fall heavily upon an institution already beset by other externally imposed events; others had clearly decided to use the audit as a context for organisational spring-cleaning.

Most of the areas that I have identified as Key Issues on the basis of the prominence accorded to them across the eight reports have also been identified, documented and often addressed in other forums. The Commonwealth policy paper, *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future*, was published as this analysis was being written; it proposes government action to address a number of issues identified in the 2002 AUQA audits: improving the functioning of Councils; a renewed emphasis on teaching and learning outcomes; attention to the needs of Indigenous students; strengthened staff performance management; and emphasis on QA for off-shore teaching activities.

If the Audit Reports show a single area in which the sector faces particular challenges, it is outreach teaching in all its guises: off-shore campuses, partnerships and external delivery all present challenges for maintaining consistency of standards, of resourcing and of planning. The problems inherent in outreach teaching are not unrelated to those that AUQA has associated with decentralised models of management. However, as institutions face the need to compete for students and thus to be ever more responsive to new and existing markets, the pressures placed on them by outreach activities will become more acute.

The true usefulness of an Audit Report will come from the extent to which it is used to focus intra-institutional conversation about the range of issues it covers and about quality improvement more generally. The action plans provided by auditees, with their allocation of follow-up tasks to various committees, in fact give hope that this will occur. As the need to improve internal communication was stressed in most of the Audit Reports, this can only be beneficial.

Certainly, this first batch of reports will enable the Agency to meet the intentions of its second Object(ive), viz to 'monitor, review, analyse and provide public reports on QA arrangements in self-accrediting institutions, and on processes and procedures of state and territory accreditation authorities, and on the impact of those processes on quality of programs'. That the scope of 'QA arrangements' has been quite broadly defined by the audit sampling process in no way diminishes this.



## APPENDIX A: AUQA'S MISSION, VALUES, & FOUR OBJECTS

### Mission:

- By means of quality audits of universities and accrediting agencies, and otherwise, AUQA will provide public assurance of the quality of Australia's universities and other institutions of HE, and will assist in improving the academic quality of these institutions.

### Values:

AUQA will be:

- *Thorough:* AUQA carries out all its audits as thoroughly as possible.
- *Supportive:* recognising institutional autonomy in setting objectives and implementing processes to achieve them, AUQA acts to facilitate and support this.
- *Flexible:* AUQA operates flexibly, in order to acknowledge and reinforce institutional diversity.
- *Co-operative:* recognising that the achievement of quality in any organisation depends on a commitment to quality within the organisation itself, AUQA operates as unobtrusively as is consistent with effectiveness and rigour.
- *Collaborative:* as a quality assurance agency, AUQA works collaboratively with the accrediting agencies (in addition to its audit role with respect to these agencies).
- *Transparent:* AUQA's audit procedures, and its own quality assurance system are open to public scrutiny.
- *Economical:* AUQA operates cost-effectively and keeps as low as possible the demands it places on institutions and agencies.
- *Open:* AUQA reports publicly and clearly on its findings in relation to institutions, agencies and the sector.

### Objects:

- Arrange and manage a system of periodic audits of QA arrangements relating to the activities of Australian universities, other self-accrediting institutions (SAIs) and state and territory HE accreditation bodies.
- Monitor, review, analyse and provide public reports on QA arrangements in SAIs, and on processes and procedures of state and territory accreditation authorities, and on the impact of those processes on quality of programs.
- Report on the criteria for the accreditation of new universities and non-university HE courses as a result of information obtained during the audit of institutions and state and territory accreditation processes.
- Report on the relative standards of the Australian HE system and its QA processes, including their international standing, as a result of information obtained during the audit process.

