

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES QUALITY AGENCY

Report of an Audit of the Three Colleges of
Think: Colleges Pty Ltd (Higher Education)

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OVERVIEW OF THE AUDIT

Background

In 2003 the Australian Government introduced the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (HESA) to allow students in non self-accrediting higher education institutions to receive financial assistance for their students' tuition fees through the FEE-HELP program.

Non self-accrediting institutions (NSAIs) approved under the HESA for this purpose have become known as higher education providers, or HEPs. Although other institutions also provide higher education, the term 'HEP' is commonly used to denote only non self-accrediting higher education providers, and it is used in this sense in this Report. The HESA requires that HEPs in receipt of FEE-HELP funds must meet a range of quality and accountability requirements, including regular audit by a quality auditing body named in the Higher Education Provider Guidelines.

This Report of the audit by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) of three colleges of Think: Colleges Pty Ltd (Think) provides an overview, and then briefly details the Audit Panel's main findings, and its commendations, affirmations and recommendations. Further information about Think's organisational and educational profile is given in Appendix A; the mission, objectives, vision and values of AUQA in Appendix B; membership of the Audit Panel in Appendix C; and abbreviations and definitions used in this Report in Appendix D. Appendix A also provides readers with some important preliminary information about the nature of Think as an organisation.

The Audit Process

AUQA bases its audits of non self-accrediting HEPs on each organisation's own objectives, together with the MCEETYA *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes* (National Protocols, available at: <http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya>, the DEEWR *Audit Handbook for non self-accrediting Higher Education Providers* and other relevant legal requirements or codes to which the organisation is committed. The programs or courses of NSAIs are accredited by government accreditation authorities, so quality audits of HEPs do not include a detailed examination of the academic quality assurance processes for individual programs of study.

HEP audits under the HESA consider institutional actions and performance in relation to, firstly, the institution's objectives; and, secondly, a group of criteria collectively known as 'Quality Audit Factors' (QAFs). The four QAFs are set out in the Handbook referred to above (and in the AUQA Audit Manual). Their primary purpose is to provide the HEPs with a framework for the review of certain aspects of institutional performance. In the report of its self review (the Performance Portfolio or Portfolio), Think reported against each of the QAFs, in addition to carrying out an ADRI (Approach-Deployment-Results-Improvement) analysis under headings based on the individual QAF criteria for review. The chapters in this Report use the four main topic headings provided by the QAFs. Within each chapter, all the criteria for that QAF are addressed, but usually in a holistic way rather than criterion by criterion.

On 28 May 2009 AUQA received the submission, comprising a 105-page self-assessment report against the individual QAF criteria, together with supplementary materials. The Audit Panel met by teleconference on 29 June 2009 to consider these documents, and additional documentation plus clarification on a list of questions was requested. The Panel noted that the Portfolio and supporting documents appropriately addressed the four quality factors and the Portfolio presented relevant information in a professional manner.

From 22 to 23 July 2009, the Audit Panel conducted audit visits to the three colleges. The Panel also reviewed on-site a number of other documents relating to the colleges' higher education quality assurance arrangements.

In all, the Audit Panel spoke with 94 people during the Audit Visit, including the CEO, the Chairman and another director of the governing body, internal and external members of the Academic Board, and a sample of academic staff and students. Sessions were also available for any other member of the colleges to meet the Audit Panel and four people took advantage of this opportunity.

This Report relates to the situation current at the time of the Audit Visit, which ended on 23 July 2009 and does not take into account any changes that may have occurred subsequently. It records the conclusions reached by the Audit Panel based on the documentation provided by the colleges, and the relevant government accreditation authority, as well as from information gained through interviews, discussion and observation. While every attempt has been made to reach a comprehensive understanding of the colleges' higher education activities, the Report does not identify every aspect of quality assurance and its effectiveness or shortcomings.

The Report contains a summary of audit findings together with lists of commendations, affirmations and recommendations. A commendation refers to the achievement of a stated goal, or to some plan or activity that has led to, or appears likely to lead to, the achievement of a stated goal, and which in AUQA's view is particularly significant. A recommendation refers to an area in need of attention, whether in respect of approach, deployment or results, which in AUQA's view is particularly significant. Where such matters have already been identified by Think, with evidence, they are termed 'affirmations'. AUQA indicates that some recommendations and affirmations have a high priority and these are marked as 'urgent'. It is also acknowledged that the recommendations in this Audit Report may have some resource implications.

Quotations taken from the documents in the Performance Portfolio are identified as 'PF p' (Portfolio page number). Finally in this Report, the term 'the colleges' is only used in reference to the three colleges audited by AUQA.

CONCLUSIONS

This section summarises the main findings and lists the commendations, affirmations and recommendations. Other favourable comments and constructive suggestions are mentioned throughout the Report.

Introduction to Findings

Think: Education Group is a federation of private colleges and within the Group, Think: Colleges Pty Ltd is the primary accreditation entity for the following three colleges that offer higher education programs:

- APM College of Business and Communication
- Billy Blue College of Design
- William Blue College of Hospitality and Tourism.

The vision of the colleges is to create the new standard in applied education and provide a credible alternative to universities and TAFE colleges. The vision and mission are distinctive and ambitious, and are operationalised in the Forward Thinking: 2010 Strategic Plan that has been developed following a comprehensive and effective consultation with stakeholders.

The Board of Directors and the Academic Board have key responsibilities in ensuring that the business and educational operations of the colleges are well managed. The business expertise the directors bring to the governance of the colleges is evident in the systematic cycle of the annual planning and budgeting processes, and monitoring progress against the Strategic Plan.

The Academic Board brings diverse expertise relevant to the specialised programs offered by the colleges. The Board of Directors receive an update on academic issues through the CEO of Think. Think has identified the need to further strengthen the independent reporting of the Academic Board to the Board of Directors, particularly as the institution continues to grow. There appeared to be some lack of clarity about the nature of an academic plan and its relationship to a college-based teaching and learning plan. Given the specialised nature of each of the colleges, AUQA endorses the need for a college-specific teaching and learning plan.

As Think expanded with the acquisition of more colleges, the various policies and procedures have been significantly reviewed. Monitoring of academic policies is well underway and there is recognition that consistent policy implementation is a challenge across all the colleges. The colleges monitor their performance against the Strategic Plan through Educational Key Performance Indicators. Better data collection to support trend analysis is still evolving.

The involvement of external members from industry, employers and professional bodies in the course development process through the course advisory committees is effective. Each college ensures that the courses developed have significant industry input and that they are designed based on needs assessed from the industry and the profession. Industry involvement in course delivery is also noteworthy. Students are confident about the value of the industry exposure they get through the colleges and the employment prospects that could eventuate from close industry engagement.

While external input and industry involvement are evident in all the three colleges, the disciplinary expertise and academic leadership available within the colleges is primarily with the program directors who share the major load of coordinating the programs with the support of a number of sessional staff. If the colleges want to make significant progress with their strategic plan for growth, then they will need to build the core capacity for sustained academic leadership within the colleges.

Most courses include a unit of study that allows students to undertake a practicum or internship with a relevant employer. Academic staff are enthusiastic about embedding engaged learning across their subjects and units of study. The significant industry background of many staff and their currency in involvement with industry contribute to the tangible excitement evident in the engaged teaching-learning processes.

Policies on student assessment are well established. However, given the large number of sessional staff who have a busy industry practice, the implementation of student assessment practices needs closer monitoring. The colleges have a sound approach to moderation processes and this Report has a commendation on that aspect.

There are seven divisions, each managed by a head of division to provide support services for teaching and learning. Although student satisfaction is high, with the expansion of the colleges, there was some evidence that the perceived user-friendliness of some services has suffered. While the colleges are clearly committed to student welfare, AUQA advises the colleges to ensure constant monitoring of the implications for the overall student experience during a time of rapid expansion.

Recruitment, induction, performance review and professional development of staff are systematically done. Induction of sessional staff, who have a busy industry life as well, is a challenge and AUQA affirms the intention of the three colleges of Think to increase the proportion of continuing full-time staff and strengthen staff induction. The regular performance review provides an opportunity for staff members and their managers to agree on areas for further professional development. The Foundation in Learning and Teaching program, funded by Think, to prepare staff for the demands and culture of higher education, is noteworthy.

The colleges have a sound quality management framework in place and have made significant progress in implementing that framework. Involvement of external stakeholders and feedback from students, staff and industry form an integral part of the quality management processes of the colleges. The Panel saw examples of benchmarking and efforts to adopt good practices. Monitoring performance against predetermined indicators and carrying out relevant benchmarking are built into the management processes. AUQA commends the three colleges of Think for their approach to quality management, in particular, the use of performance data and internal and external benchmarking. Continued embedding of the Quality Management Framework in all aspects of the three colleges' operations is important and the colleges are committed to achieving this. This Report also commends the three colleges of Think for their genuine self-review processes and emphasis on quality enhancement.

Overall, the three colleges of Think: Colleges Pty Ltd audited by AUQA have provided evidence of a thorough and genuine self assessment and they satisfy the requirements of the Quality Audit Factors.

A summary of commendations, affirmations, and recommendations follows. They are listed below in the order in which they appear in the Report.

Commendations

1. AUQA commends the Board of Directors and the Executive Leadership Team for the distinctive vision, mission and strategic directions they are pursuing for the Think: Colleges Pty Ltd.8
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9.	AUQA commends Think: Colleges Pty Ltd for its approach to quality management and in particular the use of performance data, and internal and external benchmarking.	26

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2.	AUQA affirms the need for ongoing policy review and consistent policy implementation across Think: Colleges Pty Ltd.	10
3.	AUQA affirms the use of Educational Key Performance Indicators in Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to monitor progress against the Strategic Plan.	10
4.	AUQA affirms the need to review and update academic plans and develop teaching and learning plans for each of the three colleges of Think.	13
5.	AUQA affirms the plans of Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to strengthen the academic leadership and disciplinary expertise within the colleges, for the degree programs on offer.	15
6.	(urgent) AUQA affirms the need to review the student assessment practices in Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to ensure that there is timely and appropriate feedback.	17
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10.	AUQA affirms the plans of Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to introduce a five-year cyclical review of its colleges and divisions.	26

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1. AUQA recommends that Think: Colleges Pty Ltd carefully consider the impact of rapid growth on various aspects of the student experience.....22

1 INSTITUTIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES AND INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE

Think: Education Group is a registered company that has a number of different legal entities. Some of these legal entities hold the Group's registration and accreditation, while others provide management services including the employment of staff and the provision of teaching facilities.

Think: Education Group operates under a number of different trading names across four education sectors: higher education, vocational education, English language training and secondary education. This audit covers the three colleges from the higher education sector namely, Think: Colleges Pty Ltd trading as Billy Blue College of Design, William Blue College of Hospitality and Tourism, and APM College of Business and Communication, all three are accredited to offer higher education programs.

Throughout this Report, Think refers to Think: Colleges Pty Ltd. Although there are structures that relate to the whole Think: Education Group such as the Board of Directors and the Executive Leadership Team, this audit investigated only the higher education activities of the three colleges of the Think: Colleges Pty Ltd and the comments in the Audit Report that refer to the umbrella body as 'Group' need to be seen against this context.

1.1 *Vision, Mission and Strategic Plan*

The Think: Education Group was founded in 2006, with the acquisition of the Billy Blue Group. The 2008 vision of the Group is *'to create the new standard in applied education'* and is intended to position the colleges *'to create a new category in Australian education – a credible alternative to Universities and TAFE colleges'* (Strategic Plan, p2). The vision is also described as bringing together *'specialised private colleges to create a formidable competitor to universities and TAFES'* (p3).

The vision is derived from comprehensive environmental scanning, competitor analyses, and stakeholder feedback, and is intended to enhance market opportunity, sustainability, and financial performance by building on the core expertise that already exists within the constituent colleges. Think is committed to expansion and increased market share through further acquisitions of private colleges.

The mission is to develop graduates who are:

- *Professional practitioners*
- *Highly sought after by employers*
- *Drivers of change and innovation*
- *Lifelong independent learners* (Strategic Plan 2010, p7).

Demonstration of the development and achievement of these graduate attributes comprises a major and continuing challenge for these three colleges of Think, who are in the early stages of delivering their own higher education programs. Two of the colleges have the experience of offering higher education programs in partnership with the La Trobe University and Swinburne University of Technology.

The vision and mission are distinctive and ambitious, and are operationalised in the Forward Thinking: 2010 Strategic Plan, which outlines the challenges that Think will have to face as an

emerging private higher education provider. It also addresses the strategic priorities required to achieve the vision.

The Strategic Plan outlines seven strategic goals targeting growth, quality, relationship with the industry and professions, integrated functioning, student focus, diverse student population and support services, and engaging passionate staff to develop passionate students. Actions to achieve these goals are systematically presented and supported by appropriate corporate and governance structures. The strategic planning processes have been comprehensive and effective. The Board of Directors and the Executive Leadership Team are enthusiastic in their support for achieving the distinctive vision, mission and the strategic targets.

Commendation 1

AUQA commends the Board of Directors and the Executive Leadership Team for the distinctive vision, mission and strategic directions they are pursuing for the Think: Colleges Pty Ltd.

1.2 Institutional Governance

The Portfolio states that ‘the Group operates on the principles of good governance, including:

- Clearly defined responsibility and accountability
- Evidence-based decision-making
- Transparency
- A consultative and communicative approach
- Ongoing monitoring and improvement.’ (PF p35)

The Board of Directors and the Academic Board have key responsibilities in ensuring that the operations of the colleges, as a part of a company as well as an educational entity, are well managed.

1.2.1 Board of Directors

The Board meets five times a year and primarily oversees the financial management and operations of the Company. The Board was involved in the development and endorsement of the Strategic Plan. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) (Operations) is a Director of the Company and reports to the Board of Directors on the progress of the colleges against the Strategic Plan. The CEO and the Executive Leadership Team have the responsibility to ensure that the colleges make targeted progress against the Strategic Plan.

The diverse background of the directors and the business expertise they brought to governance of the colleges was evident in the systematic cycle of the annual planning and budgeting processes, and the development, integration, review and alignment of operational plans with the goals of the Strategic Plan and annual budgeting processes (section 1.1, Commendation 1).

1.2.2 Academic Governance

The Academic Board, chaired by an external leading academic, provides oversight of the academic operations of the colleges across both vocational and higher education. The Academic Board is appointed by the Board of Directors and the Portfolio states that it ‘includes a majority of independent members’ (PF p35). Closer examination of the data and responses in interviews indicated that this was not the case; there was a majority of internal members. The Panel was informed that the original intention was to ensure majority of external membership which

changed over time to ensure representation of a broad cross section of staff in the work of the Academic Board. Think advised that it intends to implement the original intention.

The academic governance structures were reviewed in 2008–09 (including a self-review of the Academic Board) and a new Charter for the Academic Board was approved in May 2009. A new Chair has also recently been appointed.

The Academic Board currently includes six academics from six Australian universities, and representatives of senior academic staff and students of the colleges. The Panel was advised that the Board of Directors selects prospective Academic Board members for their passion in teaching and learning as well as their knowledge in the disciplines covered by the colleges. The Panel acknowledges that the composition of the Academic Board brings diverse expertise relevant to the specialised programs offered by the colleges.

The Academic Board is supported by its subcommittees, which include the Quality Committee, Teaching and Learning Committee and course advisory committees. The committees include both academic and administrative staff including college heads, deputy college heads, program directors and administrative unit managers such as library, student support and online learning. The diversity of members from both academic and administrative areas has enabled synergy between academic and support areas.

The CEO of the colleges is one of the directors and is also a member of the Academic Board. The Panel was advised that the Board of Directors receive an update on academic issues through the CEO, and that having the CEO as both a director and member of the Academic Board was deliberate in the construction of the Group's governance structure.

While this arrangement may have been an effective communication pathway between the Board of Directors and the Academic Board in the early stages of establishment, as the Group expands, it is important to strengthen the independent reporting of the Academic Board to the Board of Directors through a formal and documented mechanism such as a written report from the Chair of the Academic Board, or attendance by the Chair of the Academic Board to address such a report. The Panel was advised that the direct formal links between the Academic Board and the Board of Directors will be strengthened.

Affirmation 1

AUQA affirms the need for the Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to strengthen the systematic, formal and independent reporting of the Academic Board to the Board of Directors.

1.3 Organisational Management

The management and strategic development operations are overseen by the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) that includes the CEO, the heads of the colleges, heads of divisions and the Group Human Resource Manager. The ELT meets formally every quarter and meets informally when the need arises.

As the Group acquired more colleges, in 2008, two more executive teams were introduced – the College Executive Team (CET) and the Division Executive Team (DET). The CET includes all heads of the colleges and the Group Academic Director and is led by the Group Colleges Director. The DET includes all heads of divisions and is led by the CEO. The Panel noted the commitment of and collegiality among the members of these teams in managing the colleges.

1.4 Policy Development and Implementation

The Panel noted that various policies and procedures have been reviewed significantly in the previous year and that there were ongoing changes in many areas to try to ensure consistent and integrated operations across the colleges and divisions as well to address compliance with higher and vocational education regulations.

Development, approval and monitoring of academic policies was well underway, and effective and consistent implementation was an acknowledged priority with the Academic Services Division having major responsibilities in this regard. The Panel noted the spirit of consultation and collaboration in policy development. It was stated that communication strategies on policy changes had been effective, and staff and students interviewed by the Panel showed awareness of recent policy changes and their communication. However, there was recognition that consistent policy implementation remained a challenge across all the colleges.

Affirmation 2

AUQA affirms the need for ongoing policy review and consistent policy implementation across Think: Colleges Pty Ltd.

Think has aligned its risk management process with the Strategic Plan by mapping each strategic goal against possible associated risks. The Risk Management Plan includes a register of possible risks, their impacts, likelihood, ratings, and risk prevention and treatment strategies. The Audit and Risk Committee of the Board of Directors is responsible for overseeing risk related to financial and regulatory aspects. The Panel formed the view that the business expertise and market knowledge of the directors enables the Board of Directors to effectively monitor the risks associated with the operations of the colleges.

1.5 Monitoring Performance

Think prepares a report on Educational Key Performance Indicators (EKPIs) on each college twice a year to monitor progress towards the strategic goals. The EKPIs provide a snapshot on performance data at college level. The reports are sent to the Academic Board, the subcommittees and to all colleges to signal areas needing improvement.

The Panel was informed of the internal benchmarking carried out by the colleges to identify the performance indicators and the format of reporting. Some of the performance indicators used include: staff-student ratios, staff satisfaction, percentage of staff with postgraduate qualifications, retention rates, completion rates, overall student satisfaction, course experience questionnaire, subject satisfaction, student withdrawal, student grievances and complaints, graduate destination, employer satisfaction and percentage of courses with a work-engaged learning component (PF p42). The colleges have begun to make good use of the performance indicators to monitor progress as better data collection, analysis, and interpretation are still evolving. The Panel noted that many of these were relatively recent initiatives which will require sustained trend data analysis to achieve optimal benefits.

Affirmation 3

AUQA affirms the use of Educational Key Performance Indicators in Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to monitor progress against the Strategic Plan.

1.6 Communication with Stakeholders

The colleges have a number of communication channels including monthly electronic newsletters from the CEO on news and progress made in the different colleges and divisions.

The Panel was informed of regular staff meetings at the college and division levels. The Think: Team Portal provides updates on developments and this is an important mechanism, given the organisation's national expansion plans. Monthly staff fora facilitate communication between staff and senior managers on various developments of the colleges. Several staff commented on the value of the fora for information exchange.

Think monitors individual staff performance against the strategic goals through regular formal performance reviews. Some staff described their performance review as an enabling experience that identifies key improvement areas for the individual as well as the colleges.

The self-assessment conducted in late 2008 identified stakeholder surveys and reporting as an area needing improvement. Subsequently, the survey system was reviewed and benchmarking had been undertaken with a number of universities included in the AUQA Good Practice database as exemplars of good practice in survey management. The colleges now have a range of surveys that measure stakeholder, student, staff and employer feedback. While these are relatively recent initiatives they represent credible commitment to good practice, and with maintained application can form part of a comprehensive quality assurance system.

In particular, the Panel was presented with good examples of the use of student feedback to make improvements. The Student Representative Council (SRC) provides a platform for students to provide feedback to the colleges collectively, and every SRC has a member of the Quality Committee to facilitate two-way communication. The elected President and Secretary of SRC meet the Executive Leadership Team bimonthly to discuss issues requiring attention.

The Grievance Policy ensures appropriate management of student grievances and complaints, and the Group Academic Director is responsible for resolving student grievances in consultation with the relevant college or administrative unit. The report on the outcome of student grievances is discussed in the Quality Committee meetings.

1.7 Internal Reviews

At the time of the Audit Visit, Think was in the process of developing guidelines for cyclical reviews of its colleges and divisions. It had recently participated in an external compliance audit relating to the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) and CRICOS criteria, had formally responded to the outcomes of that audit, and at the time of the AUQA Audit Visit, was acting on the results of the AQTF audit. The Panel was also presented with evidence relating to how the colleges had responded, and had acted in response to state government accreditation and regulatory reviews and audits.

The Panel formed the view that as part of a regulated private higher education provider, the Think colleges were subject to constant external regulatory and audit procedures, and on the basis of the evidence presented, appeared to be responding professionally and responsibly.

In terms of self-assessment preceding this AUQA audit, on the basis of the documentary evidence presented, the resource and staff commitments made, and the views of participants presented, the Panel formed the view that the colleges had engaged in a genuine process of self-review. The self-assessments undertaken in late 2008, as well as other external review and

audit processes, had enabled the colleges to identify areas of good practice and those areas needing improvement.

The findings of the self-assessments were then discussed by the Academic Board and the Quality Committee, actions for further improvement were identified and endorsed, and outcomes communicated to staff and students. The Panel saw extensive evidence of a genuine self-assessment process that had resulted in ongoing improvements.

Commendation 2

AUQA commends Think: Colleges Pty Ltd for their genuine self-review processes and emphasis on quality enhancement.

2 ACHIEVING EFFECTIVENESS IN TEACHING, LEARNING AND OTHER CORE FUNCTIONS

2.1 *Strategies and Objectives*

The Strategic Plan outlines seven goals that contribute to achieving the vision '*to create the new standard in applied education*'. The list of actions attached to each strategic goal incorporates a number of objectives relating directly or indirectly to improving effectiveness in teaching and learning, and to improve student support and student experience.

2.2 *Leadership and Management*

Leadership and management in teaching and learning for each college lie with the head of college who is supported by the Group Academic Director and Group Colleges Director, as well as senior academic staff within the college. The Academic Board provides oversight in teaching and learning supported by its subcommittees.

The Academic Management Group that consists of deputy college heads, program directors, compliance managers and a staff member from online learning and the student management system monitors the implementation of key actions at college level. It also serves as a link between the subcommittees of the Academic Board and the colleges and divisions and ensures communication with teaching staff on teaching and learning issues.

2.3 *Teaching and Learning Policies*

The teaching and learning policies are available on the institutional website, and can be readily accessed by staff, students and other appropriate stakeholders. They are also available through the Think: Team Portal. Following the 2008 review of teaching and learning policies, the Academic Services Division organised information sessions for the colleges to provide consistent and comprehensive information on the policy changes.

Under the terms of reference for the Academic Board in the new Charter approved for the Academic Board in May 2009, the Academic Board is responsible for advising on an academic plan, yet neither members of the Academic Board nor other appropriate college staff interviewed were aware of such an academic plan or plans. The Portfolio identifies 'development of a Teaching and Learning Plan for each college to identify key priorities in teaching and learning, endorsed by the Teaching and Learning Committee' as an area for improvement. There appeared to be some lack of clarity about the nature of an academic plan and its relationship to a college-based teaching and learning plan. Given the specialised nature of each of the colleges, the Panel endorses the need for a college specific teaching and learning plan.

Affirmation 4

AUQA affirms the need to review and update academic plans and develop teaching and learning plans for each of the three colleges of Think.

2.4 Course Development, Approval and Delivery

2.4.1 Course Design and External Involvement

All higher education courses offered by the Think colleges are approved and accredited by the NSW Department of Education and Training (NSWDET). The Academic Services Division is responsible for managing the course development and accreditation process. The colleges take the lead on the development of the course structure in consultation with the course advisory committee and the Director of Course Development within the Academic Services Division facilitates the process.

The involvement of external members from industry, employers and professional bodies in the course development process was notable. Strategic Goal 3, Connected states *'Our relationships with our industries and professions are core to our competitive position. We need to strengthen these relationships'* (Strategic Plan 2010, p8). The colleges have a record of widespread industry connections. Each college ensures that the courses developed have significant industry input and that their design is based on needs assessed from the industry and the profession. The course advisory committees have oversight of these processes, and each committee has in its membership employers from industry and academics from universities that offer similar courses.

Industry involvement in course delivery is also noteworthy. Academic staff who come from industry backgrounds are able to approach and where possible to involve industry leaders in the core activities of the colleges through guest lectures, invitations to college activities, student placements and project assessments. Students were positive about the value of the industry exposure they get through the colleges, and expressed confidence about the employment prospects that could eventuate from close industry engagement.

Commendation 3

AUQA commends Think: Colleges Pty Ltd for its effective industry involvement in course design and delivery.

2.4.2 Course Delivery

At the time of the Audit Visit, all higher education courses were being offered at the Northpoint Campus in North Sydney or through the Flexible and Online Learning Platform. While all new courses follow the tri-semester pattern there are still some semester courses being taught, and the Panel was informed that the semester based courses are being phased out. Some staff expressed concern at the possible increase in workloads that could result from tri-semester calendars and an increased number of student intakes.

Since 2008, a standard subject/unit outline template has been devised and followed to ensure consistency in the development and delivery of individual subjects or units of study. A newly developed Flexible and Online Learning Platform enables students to have the option to undertake part of their course online. To develop the online course capacity Think carried out reviews and benchmarking of available systems, including the Open University (UK) and some Australian universities. The Panel noted that the course accreditation by the NSWDET in 2008 commended this innovative approach.

While external input and industry involvement are evident in all the three colleges, the disciplinary expertise and academic leadership available within the institution for the specialised

programs was variable and need strengthening. The program directors share the major load of coordinating the programs with the support of a number of sessional staff, many of whom are active elsewhere in their professions and industry, and have a busy schedule beyond the colleges. In other words, much of the discipline expertise and academic leadership, other than that of the program directors, college heads and their deputies, comes from externals. As the courses and modes of teaching expand in the context of higher education, the colleges will find it necessary to ensure that there is disciplinary expertise and sustained academic leadership for the degree programs within the institution.

This is especially relevant given the first major strategic goal is growth (Strategic Goal 1: *'to gain significant scale and national presence'*). The Strategic Plan 2010 states:

In 2010 we will...

- *Operate a national network of campuses & colleges*
- *Deliver programs across a range of different delivery modes*
- *Double our student population in Sydney*
- *Operate at or near capacity across our campuses*
- *Deliver an expanded portfolio of quality programs*
- *Attract a diverse student population' (p9).*

If Think wants to make significant progress with its Strategic Plan for growth in the context of higher education, then it will need to further strengthen the core capacity for disciplinary expertise within the colleges. To support the sustained future growth of colleges, Think has a proposal to appoint full-time senior lecturers as well as year (level) coordinators and specialisation coordinators who will directly work with program directors.

Affirmation 5

AUQA affirms the plans of Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to strengthen the academic leadership and disciplinary expertise within the colleges, for the degree programs on offer.

2.5 Supporting Teaching and Learning

The support service teams work across the colleges and provide centralised services but take into consideration the specific needs of the colleges. Managers from both the colleges and the support services are on the key academic committees, including the Teaching and Learning Committee and the Quality Committee. They are involved in discussions that have implications for teaching and learning. Staff were in general positive about the way this centralised structure works.

The infrastructure facilities available in the colleges appeared to be appropriate for the courses offered. To meet the specific requirements of the specialised courses offered by the colleges, the dedicated learning facilities include well-equipped classrooms, common areas for group work, drawing rooms, production environments and digital design studios. A number of classrooms of William Blue College of Hospitality and Tourism are sponsored and in some cases designed by some of Australia's leading hospitality companies. The Panel visited the restaurant run on campus by the William Blue College of Hospitality and Tourism that provides hands-on experience to its students, and students there were positive about their learning experiences.

However, as the colleges grow (and there has been a substantial recent increase in student numbers), continuing provision of infrastructure and adequate student spaces for individual work, group work and project work are already becoming a challenge. Rapid expansion appeared to be producing some concerns for students in relation to the Learning Resource Centre, where the staff were seen to be very helpful but there was a perceived pressure on available learning and teaching resources, and a lack of 'quiet spaces' for students and/or staff to engage in uninterrupted study.

The Panel was informed that there are plans to expand the infrastructure (section 3.5).

2.6 ***Engaged Learning***

Strategic Goal 3 states: *'Our relationships with our industries and professions are core to our competitive position. We need to strengthen these relationships'* (Strategic Plan 2010, p8).

The Panel was advised that over sixty percent of the higher education courses include a subject/unit of study that allows students to undertake a practicum or internship with a relevant employer. The remaining courses provide studio practice and engage students in commercial projects within the classroom environment and the industries and potential employers are involved in assessing these projects. Evaluating employer satisfaction has a key place in monitoring the effectiveness of college programs.

Strategic goal 7 is to *'engage passionate staff and educators to develop passionate students and alumni'* (Strategic Plan 2010, p8). The Panel was provided with evidence that many academic staff were dedicated in their support of students, and enthusiastic about embedding engaged learning across their subjects and units of study. The significant industry background of many staff and their currency in involvement with the industry contribute to the tangible excitement of the students and the engaged teaching-learning processes occurring in the colleges.

Despite rapid growth, recent mergers and many perceived changes, a number of students stated their appreciation of the availability of staff, commented on the commitment of many staff to provide industry-relevant experience, and affirmed their expectation that this would greatly assist them with their employment prospects.

Commendation 4

AUQA commends the teaching staff of Think: Colleges Pty Ltd for their commitment to students and engaged learning.

2.7 ***Student Assessment and Moderation***

Program directors who also have expertise in the discipline area prepare the student assessments which have been approved through formal accreditation processes. Marking student assignments, however, is done by the academic teaching staff, most of whom are sessional. Most students, who met the Panel, find the feedback from the academic staff on their assignments to be helpful and timely. The feedback from the Student Evaluation of Subject and Lecturer survey conducted in late 2008 showed high student satisfaction in relation to assessment items.

The Panel was however presented with evidence that in several instances, assigned grades and feedback on specific assignments had been unduly delayed, and in at least one case, had prevented the student from benefiting from feedback that could have improved later work. The Panel was informed that feedback from students on the assessment-related aspects is

monitored carefully to make further improvements, and that the Academic Board has a working party to review student assessment practices across the colleges.

Given the large number of sessional staff who have a busy industry practice, and some apparent variations in assessment policy implementation, the working party should consider the effectiveness of practices across all taught units of study to ensure that students get appropriate feedback on assignments which is timely and follows approved policy.

Affirmation 6

(urgent) AUQA affirms the need to review the student assessment practices in Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to ensure that there is timely and appropriate feedback.

The Academic Misconduct Policy and Procedures, which are communicated to students and staff through their handbooks, are recent. The subject/unit information also includes a statement about plagiarism. The colleges have been trialling Turnitin™ software, which it intends to implement across all colleges in 2009.

The program directors and the Examinations Committee are responsible for moderation. The Academic Board reviews the recommendations of the Examination Committee prior to the issuing of academic transcripts or testamurs. The Billy Blue College of Design and the William Blue College of Hospitality and Tourism had experienced examples of moderation processes through their partnerships with Swinburne University of Technology and La Trobe University respectively, to teach their degree courses. That experience has enabled Think to establish a solid approach to moderation processes for its higher education programs, and the Panel was provided with evidence of their application currently operating in some of the degree programs.

Commendation 5

AUQA commends Think: Colleges Pty Ltd for its sound approach to moderation of student assessment.

2.8 Monitoring Teaching and Learning

2.8.1 Consistency and Equivalence

At the time of the Audit Visit, the three colleges audited by AUQA were located in reasonable proximity on the same campus. The Group has plans to expand to other locations which would require attention to consistency in implementing policies and procedures across the various locations. Acknowledging this, Think developed a Cross-Campus Consistency Policy. The Policy requires the colleges to monitor consistency and equivalence across its courses in a range of aspects including entry criteria, admissions and enrolments, academic credit, student support services and facilities, learning experience, and student assessments.

2.8.2 Performance Indicators

Think has identified a number of indicators called Educational Key Performance Indicators (EKPIs), linked to priorities in the Strategic Plan (section 1.6). To improve reporting against EKPIs Think has undertaken some benchmarking. The colleges have a new set of EKPIs, endorsed by the Academic Board in December 2008. Trend data is not available since many of these initiatives are relatively new with one data set available. Think plans to include three years of

trend data in future to compare progress and benchmark performance indicators. This Report has an affirmation on the use of EKPIs (section 1.6).

The Panel was informed that peer review of teaching is being trialled in the William Blue College of Hospitality and Tourism, and that Think expects to use peer review of teaching across all colleges by the end of 2009.

2.8.3 Stakeholder Feedback

Think conducts a number of surveys to collect feedback from students, staff and external stakeholders, and the Panel was informed that it had benchmarked against two universities whose practices are in the AUQA Good Practice database as exemplars of survey management.

The colleges have achieved a high level of student satisfaction in the various survey results. The colleges participated in the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and the Graduate Destination Survey for the first time in 2008. The results indicated high student satisfaction in the three core scales: good teaching, generic skills and overall satisfaction. The response rate was low however and Think has implemented strategies to improve student engagement. Think has also benchmarked its 2008 CEQ overall satisfaction scale (OSS) results with other higher education providers who participated in the national survey in 2007 and, notwithstanding the issue of low response rates, those results have been interpreted as placing Think amongst the ten best institutional results within Australia.

Through the Student Satisfaction Survey, the colleges collect data on student satisfaction of the course, teacher, admissions and enrolments, resource centre/library, information technology, student support, learning infrastructure, social activities and other services provided. The Panel noted that the first Student Satisfaction Survey was conducted in late 2008 and early 2009 with 720 students participating in the survey. The Student Evaluation of Subject and Lecturer (SESL) survey results also show high student satisfaction on the subject and teacher ratings.

The Panel noted that the first Employer Survey occurred in late 2008 and early 2009 with the help of the Careers and Alumni Services Team. The survey collected feedback from employers on their satisfaction with the Think graduates on a range of generic capabilities. According to the 2008–09 Employer Survey 83% of employers were 'extremely satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the quality of the Think graduates.

Student fora, the SRC, and the Student Counsellor also contribute to collecting student feedback and student views on all aspects of college operations.

The Panel was presented with evidence that student views are valued and that there are systematic processes for acting on student feedback. The results of all surveys are reported to the Executive Leadership Team and Quality Committee. The Academic Services Division and the colleges prepare an Action Plan that is considered by key committees and divisions for further follow-up. The Panel was advised that the qualitative comments written by students on the various surveys are analysed and that each college receives a separate report of the qualitative comments. The data on the SESL survey is reported to each college.

The Panel saw a number of good examples of communicating to students the actions taken as a result of their feedback. The poster campaign, Feedback – It Matters, which was placed in all classrooms, the resource centre/library and other locations where students gather, was appreciated by the students, and the SRC gave examples of improvements which were based on student feedback in which they had been involved.

Commendation 6

AUQA commends the commitment of Think: Colleges Pty Ltd, and the processes in place, to systematically use stakeholder feedback to improve teaching and learning.

3 ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES, DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES AND RESOURCES TO SUPPORT TEACHING AND LEARNING AND OTHER CORE ACTIVITIES

The strategic goals 4 to 6 (Strategic Plan 2010, p8) have direct relevance to the services and support for students and staff. They are:

'Strategic Goal 4: Integration: To be taken seriously as the new standard of applied education, we will need to operate as an integrated Group. This will also provide improved opportunities for our students and staff.'

Strategic Goal 5: Professional: We will succeed in an increasingly competitive environment by ensuring that we are student focused in everything that we do.

Strategic Goal 6: Accessible: We will attract a diverse student population and will provide unparalleled support services to assist them to succeed.'

3.1 Support Structures for Students

There are seven divisions, each managed by a head of division and supported by relevant directors and managers in providing support services for teaching and learning. The support services for students include Student Services (Think: Buddy), Careers and Alumni (Think: Futures), guidance service (Think: Positive), learning resource centre (Think: Space) and the Billy Blue College of English.

Think: Buddy (Student Services) coordinates the centralised student support. It manages student enrolments, timetabling and recording details on the student management system (HERMES), among other things. It also provides advice to students on matters related to study and directs them to the relevant support service. It organises orientation programs to inform students of the services available and to introduce them to college and administrative staff. With the expansion of the colleges, there was some evidence that the perceived user-friendliness of this service appeared to have suffered. Think should review the impact of this service and consider strengthening it with adequate resources and staff training. The Portfolio states that an area which has been identified for further improvement is *'a review of all aspects of student support services to ensure that the resources are meeting the needs of the growing organisation'* (PF p87).

Affirmation 7

AUQA affirms the intention of Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to review the student support and service functions.

Think: Futures – the Careers and Alumni Services Team – provides careers advice and organises student placement and internships. It maintains a database of potential employers who might provide industry placements for students. Students were appreciative of the friendly, helpful and comprehensive service they get from the Think: Futures team. The Panel was advised that the team helped in the conduct of the inaugural Employer Survey. The alumni were also positive about the support they get from the Alumni Officer who maintains an alumni database and communicates with alumni across the different colleges within Think.

Commendation 7

AUQA commends Think: Colleges Pty Ltd for the career guidance and employment support offered through the Think: Futures service.

Guidance is available to students through Think: Positive that is led by the Student Support Manager who is also a student counsellor. The Panel noted that the Student Support Manager is a member of the SRC and the Quality Committee.

Think: Space provides physical and online collections, computer lab and a help desk. It also manages student access to small group working spaces across the campus. Membership of UNILINC also benefits students and staff as it provides direct access to a range of books and electronic materials of other UNILINC libraries. Involvement of Think: Space in new course development to discuss the implications for the library collections was perceived to be helpful and constructive. However, there was a perception amongst some staff and some students that for the specialised programs on offer, the resource collection needs to be expanded with a greater range of supporting specialised materials.

Computer labs are well equipped and students also have wireless internet access. The Information Technology Unit provides IT support to staff and students across the colleges.

Billy Blue College of English (BBCE) offers English language courses to international students. BBCE has provided significant support and professional development to staff in other colleges within Think, including cross-cultural training and student diversity training. Apart from offering the English language courses, BBCE also provides Learning and Academic Skills support to all students across the colleges, and some students stated that they had benefited from and valued this provision.

The Student Satisfaction Survey collects information on the percentage of students who are first in the family to study at the tertiary level. The 2008–09 survey results showed 40% of students as the first in their immediate families to attend a higher education institution, and there appeared to be good recognition amongst staff that such students may need additional support.

Attention will need to be given to ensure that the various processes for identifying 'at risk' students are understood by staff and students, and are coordinated during the phase of rapidly increasing student numbers. It was suggested by some interviewees that a pastoral care system or a 'year coordinator system' or a 'personal tutorial system' could become increasingly needed in the future.

3.2 Support for International Students

The International Student Adviser works with the Student Support Manager to support international students. English language support is provided through the Billy Blue College of English (section 3.1).

International student feedback is monitored to improve their experience and the Student Satisfaction Survey results show that international student satisfaction is slightly higher compared to domestic student satisfaction.

3.3 Records Management

The online student management system, HERMES, has the capability to store, retrieve and produce management reports on a number of student data. It also stores staff records such as qualifications and employment history. The Panel was advised that Think complies with AQTF guidelines for maintaining recordkeeping requirements.

Think stores corporate documents, such as reports and policies through a software program called Equella. This software underpins Think's Learning Object Repository, which is critical to the management of teaching and learning materials across the colleges.

3.4 Handling Grievances and Complaints

There are policies and procedures to handle grievances from staff and students. Grievances and complaints can be lodged at the student support office using a standard formal academic grievance form. In 2009, Think also introduced 'Have Your Say' cards, where students can record their suggestions, complaints and feedback. Students also have the opportunity to make an appointment with the Student Counsellor on any grievance, complaint or counselling matter. The student grievance and complaints process is communicated to students during the student orientation and also explained in the student handbook. Student grievances and complaints are recorded in a Register and the Group Academic Director is responsible for resolving the complaints.

Feedback from staff during their performance reviews is also used to note and act on staff concerns and grievances.

3.5 Monitoring the Support Services

Think monitors the performance of its support services primarily through surveys and student and staff satisfaction. The newly introduced feedback card, Have Your Say, is another mechanism used to monitor student suggestions, complaints and positive feedback. The results of the feedback card are presented to the Quality Committee. Discussions and suggestions from the SRC also help Think monitor student satisfaction of the support services.

The Post-Orientation Survey result of 2009 shows 64% of the respondents marking 'very good' and 'good' on overall satisfaction of the orientation. CEQ results show a high level of student satisfaction on health, welfare and counselling, and careers and employment service.

The Panel however was presented with a number of perceived gaps between student expectations and realities mainly due to the expansion of the colleges. As the colleges expand, the impact of rapid growth on student experience needs careful monitoring. For example, some students expressed a loss of perceived 'college' identity as the various changes had taken place, some perceived that the quality of individual recognition and services by support staff had diminished, and others commented about an increasing shortage of space for individual study and group work.

Throughout the Audit Visit, in a number of interviews on various aspects of the student experience, the Panel came across new developments, emerging policies and still evolving practices, the purposes and impacts of which were not always clear to students. While the colleges are clearly committed to student welfare and in many areas student satisfaction is high, the Panel advises the colleges to ensure constant monitoring of the implications for the overall student experience of constant changes during a time of rapid expansion.

Recommendation 1

AUQA recommends that Think: Colleges Pty Ltd carefully consider the impact of rapid growth on various aspects of the student experience.

3.6 Recruitment and Induction of Academic Staff

A significant proportion of academic staff are engaged on a sessional basis and most of them are actively involved within their industry or profession. The results of the national CEQ show a very high student satisfaction on the good teaching scale. The results of the 2008 SESL survey also show high student satisfaction with the educator at the subject/unit level, and students clearly value the current industry knowledge of their teachers.

Recruitment of staff is managed systematically, with standardised position descriptions, selection processes and selection criteria. Except for the program directors, most of the academic staff are employed on a sessional basis. However, the Panel was informed that many of the sessional staff have had a relatively stable relationship with the colleges and the Panel met some sessional staff who have been engaged with the colleges for many years. The Panel saw some evidence of performance review that is mainly built on student survey results.

Wherever possible Think tries to ensure that staff who teach at a particular level have qualifications at least one level above the level at which they are teaching. However, the specialised nature of the programs offered and the distinctive vision of the colleges require the involvement of staff with current and relevant industry experience, which means that the aim of 'one level above' has not always been achieved. This poses challenges in getting staff with qualifications appropriate for teaching higher education courses, and the Panel noted that this issue had also been raised in other review and audit processes.

The Panel saw the plans which Think has developed towards gradually strengthening the profile of staff qualifications and the plans to increase the proportion of continuing full-time academic staff, and the Panel strongly endorses those initiatives.

Think's administrative staff has grown significantly in the last 12 months in line with the growth in enrolments. The recruitment of administrative staff is managed systematically by the Group Human Resources Manager in conjunction with the relevant head of division. Think is aware of the equality and diversity issues in staff recruitment.

Staff members are inducted by the relevant college or division. Induction of sessional staff who have a busy industry life as well is a challenge especially on aspects such as vision and mission, academic policies, required and desirable student assessment practices, and student feedback. The academic staff handbook, a recent introduction, is comprehensive with considerable information related to teaching and learning and staff employment. The Portfolio states that it has identified centralised and consistent teaching staff induction that would include 'information about the Group, student diversity, principles of good teaching, student assessments, student engagement and retention in learning, teaching and learning policies and quality management and continuous improvement' as an area for improvement.

Affirmation 8

AUQA affirms the intention of Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to increase the proportion of continuing full-time staff and strengthen the staff induction process.

3.7 Professional Development

The Panel was informed that professional development opportunities for academic and administrative staff are made available internally and externally. The regular performance review provides an opportunity for staff members and their managers to agree on areas for further professional development.

Think has invested in the Foundation in Learning and Teaching (FILT) program to prepare staff for the demands and culture of higher education, for those with limited teaching experience, and for those transitioning from vocational to higher education. It is a three day program conducted by Macquarie University's Learning and Teaching Centre, and the Panel was informed that this important professional development initiative was fully funded by Think. The most recent FILT program, run in

early 2009, was attended by more than 50 academic staff from the various colleges, and staff expressed a very high level of satisfaction (94% explicit satisfaction) with the FILT program. Think intends to continue with this program and has plans to make it available online.

Commendation 8

AUQA commends Think: Colleges Pty Ltd for its investment in the Foundation in Learning and Teaching program to prepare staff for higher education course delivery.

The colleges actively promote staff interaction with industry. Inviting industry experts to provide guest lectures and hosting industry dinners and events are a few of the activities that promote staff engagement with industry. The APM College of Business and Communication prepares an annual schedule of the Executive Lecture Series.

The Professional Development Policy encourages staff members to participate in conferences and to present papers. The Professional Development Committee manages an annual budget for external professional development, which includes financial support for conferences. The Panel noted the newly launched fellowship program named after the late Professor Susan Holland for her outstanding contribution to Think: Education Group as the former Chair of the Academic Board. This merit-based fellowship is open to educators and staff in the areas of excellence in teaching and learning and academic management. These recent initiatives are encouraging, and will allow staff to maintain and extend their disciplinary expertise.

Affirmation 9

AUQA affirms the intention of Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to provide opportunities for academic staff to undertake sustained professional development.

4 MAINTAINING A COMMITMENT TO QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

The colleges make use of a quality management framework that is undergoing continuous improvement. Involvement of external stakeholders and feedback from students, staff and industry are an integral part of the quality management processes of the colleges. The Panel saw examples of benchmarking and efforts to adopt good practices. Monitoring performance against predetermined indicators is built into the management processes. Overall, the Panel saw the emergence of a quality culture and commitment to continuous improvement in the three colleges.

4.1 *Quality Management Framework*

The colleges have a single quality management framework for both higher and vocational education. To develop that framework, Think undertook a benchmarking study of the quality frameworks used in various dual sector universities. The framework uses an 'approach, deployment, results and improvement' (ADRI) quality cycle. The framework outlines the mechanisms by which Think will review its core and support activities and they include: EKPIs, internal self assessments, student, staff and employer surveys, AQTF quality indicators, staff performance reviews, benchmarking and five-yearly AUQA and AQTF audits (PF p93).

Quality improvement is embedded in Think's Quality Management Framework and in 2008 Think developed its Quality Management and Continuous Improvement Policy, which outlines the key principles to making continuous improvements. Think is conscious of the need to monitor implementation of the various policies and has developed a policy to require and promote consistency across colleges. Recognition of the need for consistent implementation is therefore not only apparent but is being acted on.

Staff understanding about and involvement in quality management, and knowledge of the Quality Management Framework, is being actively promoted and there is evidence of engagement and progress. The Think: Quality web page launched in late 2008 provides up-to-date information on the organisation's approach to quality. The Academic Services Division has regular meetings with each college to discuss performance data, including EKPIs and survey results.

4.2 *Self-assessments and Compliance Checks*

The Academic Board and its committees provide leadership in academic quality management of the colleges. The Academic Services Division provides advice and support for ongoing improvement. The various review mechanisms now being implemented enable the colleges to measure their progress on the Strategic Plan, and identify areas where further improvement is needed.

In particular, the two self-assessment exercises of these three colleges – one of the whole entity and the other of the Academic Board and its subcommittees, have resulted in changes to the quality management process. At the time of the Audit Visit, some of the results and recommendations of these two reports were being implemented and the colleges were experiencing more changes. Systematic follow-up in coming years will enable sustained improvements.

As a non self-accrediting institution, Think undergoes compliance checks by relevant bodies such as the NSW Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board and the NSW Department of Education and Training (NSWDET). The report of one such recent audit was made available to the Panel at the time of the AUQA audit, and it was evident that Think was already acting on the

recommendations. The input AUQA received from the NSWDET also indicates the ability of Think to respond quickly and make improvements to address issues. As part of AUQA audit preparations and re-registration in 2010, Think undertook a preliminary desk audit against the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes in May 2009.

In 2008, Think introduced subject/unit reviews to ensure that each subject/unit offered is up-to-date and that it meets the changing demands of industry and employers. It plans a five-year cyclical review of its colleges and divisions. The self assessment conducted in 2008 identified the need for formal review processes, which would take a holistic approach to reviewing each of the colleges and divisions, which the Panel endorses.

Affirmation 10

AUQA affirms the plans of Think: Colleges Pty Ltd to introduce a five-year cyclical review of its colleges and divisions.

4.3 Use of Data and Benchmarking

Think now uses a range of performance data including EKPIs and student, staff and stakeholder surveys to provide assessment of progress towards strategic objectives. Benchmarking within Think is prescribed in the Quality Management Framework. In 2008, Think started benchmarking in a number of areas including CEQ data, and online and flexible learning. The self-assessment conducted in 2008 recommended a systematic approach to benchmarking and providing guidelines to all colleges. As a result, Think developed guidelines for benchmarking which were endorsed by the Quality Committee in early 2009.

Think plans to engage in a number of benchmarking projects in 2009–10 including the benchmarking project of the UNILINC library. William Blue College of Hospitality and Tourism is planning to benchmark with the University College Birmingham on curriculum, resourcing and infrastructure and student outcomes. The college will also be involved with the Association of Australian Hotel Schools in a range of areas.

As mentioned in previous sections, the Panel saw considerable evidence of the colleges' systematic use of survey data and feedback mechanisms. When Think implements key improvements as a direct result of student feedback, it communicates these improvements through the Feedback – It Matters poster campaign and the SRC. There is a plan to develop guidelines to reward divisions that perform well in the surveys.

Overall, Think has a sound quality management framework in place. It has made significant progress in implementing that framework and making improvements as a direct result of its internal assessments, feedback analyses and external reference points. Maintaining that commitment to improvement through sustained and comprehensive embedding of the Quality Management Framework in all aspects of the three colleges' operations will see the emergence of a quality culture that will benefit all staff and students of Think.

Commendation 9

AUQA commends Think: Colleges Pty Ltd for its approach to quality management and in particular the use of performance data, and internal and external benchmarking.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: THINK: COLLEGES PTY LTD

Think: Education Group is a federation of private colleges, founded in 2006, and operates across three education sectors, including English language training, vocational education and training, and higher education. It is focused on four key industry areas. These include: Creative Industries; Hospitality and Tourism; Healthcare and Wellness; and Business and Communication. The courses offered range from certificate II to postgraduate degrees. Think: Education Group is a private company and is wholly owned by Seek Limited (ASX: SEK) – a provider of careers and online recruitment services.

Within the Group, Think: Colleges Pty Ltd is the primary accreditation entity for the following colleges:

1. APM College of Business and Communication
2. Australasian College of Natural Therapies
3. Billy Blue College of Design
4. Commercial Arts Training College
5. William Blue College of Hospitality and Tourism operate.

Think: Colleges Pty Ltd is a registered training organisation, higher education institution and is approved by the NSW Board of Studies for the delivery of vocational programs to secondary school students. At the time of the AUQA audit, three colleges within Think: Colleges Pty Ltd offered higher education courses. These are: APM College of Business and Communication, Billy Blue College of Design and William Blue College of Hospitality and Tourism. This audit covers these the higher education activities of these colleges.

The Three Colleges Audited by AUQA

Billy Blue College of Design was founded in 1986. In 2002, Billy Blue established a partnership with the Faculty of Design at Swinburne University of Technology to deliver the final year of the University's Bachelor of Design to Billy Blue's advanced diploma graduates. In 2007 it launched its first higher education courses with the Associate Degree in Communication Design and the Associate Degree in Multimedia Design. In 2008, Billy Blue undertook a course development process, leading to the development and accreditation of its own Bachelor of Applied Design with specialisations in Communication Design, Digital Media Design and Branded Environment.

William Blue College of Hospitality and Tourism was established in 1991. In 2004, William Blue established a partnership with La Trobe University for the delivery of the final year of the Bachelor of Business (Hospitality and Tourism) to William Blue advanced diploma graduates in Sydney. In 2007, William Blue launched its first higher education course with the Associate Degree in Hospitality Management. In 2008, William Blue further developed its own Bachelor of Business with specialisations in Hospitality and Tourism Management.

APM College of Business and Communication was established in 1986 as the Australian Progressive Marketing (APM) Training Institute. In 2007, APM joined Think: Education Group and commenced the development and accreditation of the Bachelor of Business with specialisations in Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations. In 2008, APM developed a further specialisation in Event Management and was successful in the accreditation of the delivery of these courses by flexible and online learning.

Vision, Mission and Goals

The vision, mission and strategic goals are as set by the Group. The vision of the Group is *'to create the new standard in applied education'*. The mission is to develop graduates who are:

- *'Professional practitioners*
- *Highly sought after by employers*
- *Drivers of change and innovation*
- *Lifelong independent learners.'*

Forward Thinking: 2010, the strategic plan of the Group, has seven key goals and priorities:

1. Growth
2. Quality
3. Connected
4. Integration
5. Professional
6. Accessible
7. Passionate.

Academic Profile (March 2009)

Colleges	Courses	Student numbers (head count)	
		Domestic	International
Billy Blue College of Design	Bachelor of Applied Design (Communication) Associate Degree in Communication Design Bachelor of Applied Design (Digital Media) Associate Degree in Multimedia Design Bachelor of Applied Design (Branded Environment)	317	106
William Blue College of Hospitality and Tourism	Associate Degree of Hospitality Management Bachelor of Business (Hospitality Management) Bachelor of Business (Tourism Management)	34	14
APM College of Business and Communication	Bachelor of Business (Marketing) Bachelor of Business (Advertising) Bachelor of Business (Public Relations) Bachelor of Business (Event Management) Bachelor of Communication (Journalism)	160	6
Total		511	126
Grand Total		637	

These courses are supported by 17 academic staff, 152 sessional teaching staff and 81 administrative staff, with the staff teaching and supporting both vocational and higher education courses.

APPENDIX B: AUQA'S MISSION, OBJECTIVES, VISION AND VALUES

Mission

AUQA is the principal national quality assurance agency in higher education with the responsibility of providing public assurance of the quality of Australia's universities and other institutions of higher education, and assisting in enhancing the academic quality of these institutions.

Objectives

AUQA is established to be the principal national quality assurance agency in higher education, with responsibility for quality audits of higher education institutions and accreditation authorities, reporting on performance and outcomes, assisting in quality enhancement, advising on quality assurance; and liaising internationally with quality agencies in other jurisdictions, for the benefit of Australian higher education.

Specifically, the objectives of AUQA are as follows:

1. Arrange and manage a system of periodic audits of:
 - the quality of the academic activities, including attainment of standards of performance and outcomes of Australian universities and other higher education institutions;
 - the quality assurance arrangements intended to maintain and elevate that quality;
 - compliance with criteria set out in the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes;and monitor, review, analyse and provide public reports on the quality of outcomes in Australian universities and higher education institutions.
2. Arrange and manage a system of periodic audits of the quality assurance processes, procedures, and outcomes of State, Territory and Commonwealth higher education accreditation authorities including their impact on the quality of higher education programs; and monitor, review, analyse and report on the outcomes of those audits.
3. Publicly report periodically on matters relating to quality assurance, including the relative standards and outcomes of the Australian higher education system and its institutions, its processes and its international standing, and the impact of the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes on Australian Higher Education, using information available to AUQA from its audits and other activities carried out under these Objectives, and from other sources.
4. Develop partnerships with other quality agencies in relation to matters directly relating to quality assurance and audit, to facilitate efficient cross-border quality assurance processes and the international transfer of knowledge about those processes.

Vision

To consolidate AUQA's position as the leading reference point for quality assurance in higher education in and for Australia. Specifically:

- AUQA's judgements will be widely recognised as objective, accurate and useful, based on its effective procedures, including auditor training and thorough investigation.
- AUQA's work will be recognised by institutions and accrediting agencies as adding value to their activities, through the emphasis on autonomy, diversity and self-review.
- Through AUQA's work, there will be an improvement in public knowledge of the relative academic standards of Australian higher education and an increase in public confidence in Australian higher education.
- Through AUQA's work with other quality assurance agencies, the international quality assurance requirements for Australian higher education institutions will be coherent and rigorous, avoiding duplication and inconsistency.
- AUQA's advice will be sought on quality assurance in higher education, through mechanisms including consulting, training and publications.
- AUQA will be recognised among its international peers as a leading quality assurance agency, collaborating with other agencies and providing leadership by example.

Values

In its external relations, AUQA will be:

- *Rigorous*: AUQA carries out all its audits as rigorously and thoroughly as possible.
- *Supportive*: AUQA recognises institutional autonomy in setting objectives and implementing processes to achieve them, and acts to facilitate and support this.
- *Flexible*: AUQA operates flexibly, in order to acknowledge and reinforce institutional diversity, and is responsive to institution and agency characteristics and needs.
- *Cooperative*: AUQA recognises that the achievement of quality in any organisation depends on a commitment to quality within the organisation itself, and so 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.

APPENDIX C: THE AUDIT PANEL

Emeritus Professor Zbys Klich, Consultant & former Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) & Vice-President, Southern Cross University, (Chair)

Dr Antony Stella, Audit Director, Australian Universities Quality Agency

APPENDIX D: ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

The following abbreviations and definitions are used in this Report. As necessary, they are explained in context.

ADRI	Approach, Deployment, Results, Improvement
APM	APM College of Business and Communication
AQTF	Australian Quality Training Framework (VET, qv)
ASX.....	Australian Securities Exchange
AUQA	Australian Universities Quality Agency
BBCE	Billy Blue College of English
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CEQ	Course Experience Questionnaire (GCA, qv) (http://www.graduatecareers.com.au/content/view/full/868)
CRICOS	Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students
DEEWR.....	Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
EKPIs	Educational Key Performance Indicators
FEE-HELP	FEE-HELP is a loan given to eligible fee-paying students to help pay part or all of their tuition fees.
FILT	Foundation in Learning and Teaching
HEP(s).....	higher education provider(s)
HERMES	Think's student management system
HESA	<i>Higher Education Support Act 2003</i>
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (now disbanded)
NSAI(s)	non self-accrediting institution(s)
NSW	New South Wales
NSWDET.....	New South Wales Department of Education and Training
OSS.....	overall satisfaction scale
PF p.....	Performance Portfolio page reference
Portfolio.....	Performance Portfolio: Self-Review Report
QAF(s)	Quality Audit Factor(s)
SESL	Student Evaluation of Subject and Lecturer
SRC	Student Representative Council
UNILINC	shared library catalogue system
VET	Vocational Education and Training

