

Quality assurance dysfunctions

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Academic audit – a case study from New Zealand

An external QA process conducted in NZ since 1994 ...

1. Operated by non-government agency: the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (www.aqa.ac.nz)
2. Aims to assure *and* enhance quality
3. Focus on internal QA *processes* (not outcomes)
4. Institution level (not programmes)
5. Peer review
6. Recommendations but no pass/fail judgement(s)

PhD: Qualitative, longitudinal case-study

- Engagement with academic audit, 1994–2019
- Methodology: documentary evidence, 19 interviews
- 11 recommendations *recurred*...
- Recurrence: potential challenges with engagement and implementation of recommendations
 1. Closing the student feedback loop
 2. Monitoring PhD student progress (six-monthly reports)
 3. 'QA infrastructure and leadership'
- Supervisors: Prof Stephen Marshall, A/Prof Kate Thornton

Summary findings: QA dysfunctions Part 1

- Institution side:**
- Good intentions
 - Reinterpretation
 - Deferral
 - Repackaging

*Some quotes used in this presentation
have been paraphrased for clarity/brevity*

Good intentions

- Background: The AQA encourages ‘enhancement initiatives’ in self-review process
- **Cycle 3 self-review (2005)**: “The university will conduct a major planning exercise that will re-think QA, including the roles, responsibilities and membership of Academic Board, Academic Committee and Quality Office...”
- **Cycle 4 audit (2009)**: Modest changes to Academic Board structure and membership; no other changes
- **Conclusion**: Avoid overpromising (institution)

Reinterpretation

- **Cycle 5 audit (2014):** “Urgently incorporate feedback to students regarding actions taken in response to course evaluations”
- **Cycle 5 mid-cycle report-back (2019):** “Recommendation has been implemented and timeliness of evaluation of course feedback has improved”
- In fact: no implementation; ‘timeliness’ not relevant
- **Conclusions:** Be truthful (institution). Be attentive (agency)

Deferral

- **Cycle 2 audit (2000):** Recommendation: “Create a compendium of QA processes”
- **Cycle 3 self-review (2005):** “We reviewed key issues raised in the report and will start [sic] a review...”
- Nothing about compendium of QA processes
- **Symptoms:** Actions are “ongoing” or “working group formed”
- **Conclusion:** Be attentive (agency), lest deferral by institution become a permanent state

Repackaging

- **Cycle 2 audit (2000):** “Close the student feedback loop”
- **Cycle 3 audit (2005):** “Close the student feedback loop”
- **Cycle 4 self-review (2009):** Enhancement initiative:
“We will establish [sic] a systematic process for responding to student feedback”
- Recommendation not implemented, now repackaged
- **Conclusion:** Be attentive (agency) and challenge failure to implement

Summary findings: QA dysfunctions Part 2

Quality agency side:

- Echoing
- Reinforcement
- Complexity
- Superimposition
- Abandonment

Echoing

- **Cycle 2 self-review (2000)**: “We were advised to strongly encourage/require staff to provide feedback about survey results to students and explain how their concerns will be addressed”
- **Cycle 2 audit (2000)**: “Teachers should be strongly encouraged/required to provide feedback to students about the results of evaluations and notify how any concerns will be addressed”
- **Symptoms**: “The panel was told that ...[verbatim quote from self-review]” or “The university intends to ...[ditto]”
- **Conclusion**: Echoing is an indicator of possible superficiality

Reinforcement

- **Cycle 3 audit (2005):** “The panel was pleased to hear that a new Learning and Teaching Committee will be established and urges that this be done as quickly as possible”
- A suggestion, not a formal recommendation
- Echoing is observational / Reinforcement implies action
- **Conclusion:** If a recommendation is needed, make one. Suggestions are less likely to be implemented if they are buried in the document text.

Complexity: An example of 1 recommendation:

“The panel recommends that the University continues to develop and implement an appropriate institution-wide quality assurance infrastructure and institutional leadership for quality assurance and quality enhancement activities that:

1. builds on and enhances those existing mechanisms and procedures that are effective in supporting a quality culture,
2. facilitates ownership of, and engagement with, quality and continuous improvement activities by the whole University community, and
3. provides assurance of institution-wide quality in research, teaching, learning and community engagement” (Cy4AR, 2009, p. 31)

Superimposition

Cycle 2 audit (2000): (1) “Centralize the checking of PhD student biannual progress monitoring and ...

(2) analyse progress monitoring for possible systemic issues”

- Research found only 1 instance (in 19 years) of a systemic issue that was not of a personal nature
- Why collect and address *personal* issues systemically?
- **Conclusion:** Did the agency create extra bureaucracy?
- **Postscript:** The university did not collate personal information; it ‘disobeyed’ the recommendation

Abandonment

- **Cycle 5 audit report (2014):** “The use of student feedback has been reviewed but there is still a significant agenda for change in teaching and learning”
- **Cycle 5 follow-up report (2016):** No comment from agency about lack of implementation
- **Cycle 5 mid-cycle report (2019):** No comment from agency about lack of implementation
- **Conclusion:** Why bother giving the recommendation?

Overall conclusions

- Auditors / evaluators must be experienced
- A longitudinal approach can detect dysfunctions
- Recommendations must be workable, concise, clear
- Encourage candour about implementation challenges
- Agency should not abandon earlier recommendations
- Targeted QA scope may help avoid superficiality
- Hierarchical structures seem to hinder quality/QA
- Carefully consider potential superimposition

Thank you / рақмет!

Questions?

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