External Quality Audit as an Opportunity for Institutional Change and Improvement

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Abstract

There is limited evidence regarding whether external quality audits contribute to strategic change and improvement in universities. The majority of literature on the subject is anecdotal and reflects two opposite viewpoints. First, audits do not contribute to institutional improvement and enhancement of student learning experience. Second, audits, if managed effectively and aligned well with internal systems and processes, may motivate universities to self-assess and improve their core business and services.

This paper outlines the steps taken by the University of Western Sydney to effectively prepare for the External Quality Audit by the Australian Universities Quality Agency in 2006, with the view to use this audit as a lever for internal change and improvement. The areas where improvement was needed were identified in the process of the audit preparation through the University-wide self assessment, internal reviews, tracking performance data and the outcomes of the trial audit. Further, based on the comparison of the University performance data from various sources before and after the audit the paper concludes that audits can be used as a lever for institutional change and can contribute to measurable improvement.

Quality Management at UWS

Some relatively older Australian universities, such as those in the "Group of Eight", have had their systems for strategic planning and quality assurance in place for a long time. The University of Western Sydney (UWS) with its history of structural change has had to establish such systems relatively recently. In 2001 after the mergers with three member institutions UWS established the Office of Planning and Quality (OPQ) in order to coordinate University quality management initiatives, provide advice on strategic planning and review activities, provide information for tracking and improving performance, and manage complaints. In 2003-2004 UWS developed and implemented its first strategic plans, covering Learning and Teaching, Research, and Community Engagement.

Preparation for the 2006 Australian Universities Quality Agency Audit

In December 2005 the University was formally notified by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) of its intention to audit UWS in October 2006. The audit was to involve three onshore site visits to UWS campuses and three offshore visits to UWS presences in China, Hong Kong and Singapore. The University adopted a number of strategies in its preparation for the AUQA audit.

Leadership

UWS started its preparations for the audit by appointing a new Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC), Quality who led the audit process. The University formed a Strategy and Quality Committee which included all University senior staff.

Communication

In order to promote awareness among the University community of the approaching audit and to keep people in the loop, various communication strategies were used. The PVC, Quality visited all colleges, schools, research centres, entities, administrative units and student associations. The "listen, link and lead" approach was effectively used while discussing quality issues raised by staff and students during these visits. In this approach "listen" involved asking people to identify areas they saw as needing

improvement and improvement strategies they perceived as being relevant and feasible; "link" meant bringing those strategies together into a plan of action which was, therefore, "owned" by those who were to implement it; and "lead" meant giving targeted support to these people to learn the "gaps" in their expertise which need to be addressed to make the change work, along with working with them to monitor and refine the pilot versions of different solutions before scaling them up. In total these visits allowed the PVC, Quality to meet more than 1,800 people across the University.

The AUQA audit was one of the standing agenda items at all University and college level committee meetings. These meetings were attended by the PVC, Quality or a delegated staff member. The University also appointed an Associate PVC, Quality, which is unique in the sector, to assist the PVC, Quality. The Associate PVC, Quality introduced a Heads of Program network around the University. This network was set up to provide peer-support for those front-line staff who actually put each quality improvement action into daily practice. The University organised two campus forums at each of its six campuses before the audit to ensure that staff and students were informed about it.

University-wide Self Assessment and Reviews

In 2004-2005 the University conducted a quality self assessment of all academic and administrative units including research centres, entities and student associations. Key issues that emerged from the self assessment data were discussed by the Strategy and Quality Committee, and the areas warranting improvement were signed off. For example**,** the discussion resulted in the conception and realization of the UWS Retention Project (Shah, Grebennikov & Singh, 2007) and the UWS Assessment Project, which is currently underway. Apart from the self assessment, in 2004 the University conducted a review of its offshore programs, and in 2005 the UWS Community Engagement review which resulted in the development of the UWS Community Engagement database.

Further, as a result of this self assessment the University implemented the Tracking and Improvement system for Learning and Teaching (TILT). The system integrates a series of data gathering tools, such as student, staff and community surveys, and performance reports into an overall diagnosis of areas of good practice and areas where improvement is needed. TILT was introduced in 2005 as part of quality management at UWS to ensure that stakeholder feedback is gathered, analysed and reported to the University community, and that improvement actions are efficient.

Improvement Priorities

Based on the University-wide quality self assessment, 2004-2005 reviews, and the analyses of student, staff and community feedback using TILT, the University identified several improvement priorities including:

- Learning and teaching (investment in online and flexible learning);

- Retention Project (identification of areas most important to student retention in the unique context of UWS with subsequent critical examination and improvement action);

- Assessment and unit outlines (consistency and equivalence in assessment and unit outlines at multiple teaching locations including offshore);

- Consistency of student services at all campuses (investment in student services and support at all six campus to ensure comparable standard of student experience);

- Library services for offshore students (improvement in access to library collections for offshore students as suggested by the 2005 Offshore Student Satisfaction Survey outcomes);

- Effective management of information system (production of annual courses reports with performance data for 12 areas at University, college and course specific level);

- Quality assurance for offshore programs (development and implementation of quality assurance guidelines for offshore programs and partners);

- Community engagement (development of a framework for community engagement including the appointment of Associate Dean, Engagement in each College to provide leadership);

- Human resources (development of effective University-wide human resources strategy which includes induction, professional development, performance management, reward and succession strategy);

- Improved synergy between academic and support services (e.g., Academic units, Student Support Services, Information Technology, Library, Capital Works and Facilities).

The above improvement projects were lead by senior staff members and progress was reported to the Strategy and Quality Committee.

Keeping Students in the Loop on Improvements

The University communicated the improvement priorities to all students via the posters "Feedback – it counts" which included the improvement actions agreed by the relevant divisional heads. The posters outlined the improvements planned or underway to enhance student experience based on the feedback from a range of surveys integrated by TILT. The posters were placed on the UWS e-learning portal, the OPQ website and across all campuses at locations most popular among students.

Quality Audit Informational Resources

While the above processes were underway OPQ liaised with several universities, which had completed the AUQA audits, in order to learn from their experience. Networking with the audited universities was very helpful for UWS in terms of planning the forthcoming audit and discussing areas for improvement. The AUQA audit reports from 33 universities completed by October 2006 were analysed and summarised in the document titled "AUQA Audit Themes" which was continuously updated as more AUQA audit reports were made public.

Trial Audit

The trial audit was held 1-3 May 2006. In total the trial audit panel spoke with 210 staff, students and board members. There was very positive feedback from all participants on the approach used by the university to prepare for the trial audit. The participants saw the outcomes of the briefing and debriefing sessions on the day as an additional and important source of self-assessment data, along with the areas of good practice and improvement identified by the trial audit panel itself.

The University found the trial audit very useful. It complimented the UWS own self-assessment and various reviews undertaken earlier. This aligns well with findings of Winchester (2003) who surveyed nine Australian universities audited in 2002 on the benefits of the trial audit. All nine institutions reported that the trial audits were extremely useful components of their self-review processes.

Using External Audit as a Lever for Internal Improvement: UWS Experience

As argued by Scott and Hawke (2003), a unique benefit of an external quality audit for a university is the extrinsic motivation it provides for that university to document, critique and enhance its internal capability for continuous quality assurance, improvement and innovation. Similar conclusions were reached in a number of studies reviewing university audit processes overseas, for example in South Africa (Wickham, Coetzee, Jones, & Metcalfe, 2007), Denmark (Kristensen, 1997), United Kingdom, New Zealand, Sweden and Hong Kong (Dill, 2000).

Other researchers (Harvey, 2002; Newton, 2000) argue that there is no evidence that external quality audits have positive impacts on student learning experience. A large study on change processes in higher education in the UK, Sweden and Norway during the 1990s found that external quality audits contributed to increased "bureaucratisation" (Kogan, Bauer, Bleilie, & Henkel, 2000).

The UWS experience shows that the upcoming AUQA audit motivated the University to self-assess and improve its core business and support services. Normally this happens as part of formal review processes, however, the effective use of the external driver lead to improvement or innovation as direct results of review outcomes. Some examples of such improvements at UWS resulted from both the preparations for and the process of the AUQA audit include:

- development of a range of tracking, reporting and improvement systems, which might have been developed anyway, but the speed of development and their uptake were definitely enhanced;

- development of a more evidence based culture of decision-making;

- implementing improvement projects as a direct result of reviews and stakeholder feedback;

- fostering active engagement in benchmarking with similar institutions;

- more coordinated, systematic and consistent approach to planning and review across UWS Colleges and divisions;

- University-wide Retention Project implemented in 2004-2006 and resulted in a 4.2% improvement in overall retention and a 3.9% increase for first year undergraduate students;

- University wide implementation of quality management of assessments;

- improved engagement with student associations and University entities;

- formation of network groups (e.g., Head of Program Network) to provide peer-support for those staff who put each improvement project into daily practice;

- centralised and effective management of offshore programs and partnerships;

- improved synergy between various support services, such as library, IT and student support;

- strengthening the role of OPQ to facilitate planning, reviews and improvement;

- development of a quality management framework for University-community engagement.

Is There Evidence of Improvements?

Having acknowledged that the varied impacts that external quality reviews have on universities are not easy to measure, Harvey (2006) summarises such impacts as "changes evident from one review to the next; improvements in performance indicators; adoption of formal internal quality processes by institutions; student feedback indicating positive changes and employer perceptions about the improvement in graduate abilities" (p. 287). Consistent with this, the UWS experience appears to suggest that external quality assurance, aligned with effective internal processes, can enhance the core business of the University.

Table 1 presents a range of University performance data before and after the AUQA audit. As shown in the table, the University has made positive progress in such areas as stakeholder satisfaction in learning and teaching, research, international student experience, Indigenous student satisfaction, and community engagement.

Table 1: Tracking Performance Before and After the AUQA Audit

	Before AUQA audit			After AUQA audit
Performance measure	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**
Retention rate (%)	74.3	73.2	76.8	77.4
Student Satisfaction Survey Overall Satisfaction (mean)	3.34	-	-	3.71
Course Experience Questionnaire All scales (% scoring 4 or 5 i.e. max) Generic Skills (% scoring 4 or 5) Good Teaching (% scoring 4 or 5) Overall Satisfaction (% scoring 4 or 5)	46.4 54.5 41.7 55.4	51.3 61.5 44.1 62.0	52.5 62.0 45.4 61.7	54.3 63.5 45.6 65.6
Student Feedback on Units Overall Satisfaction (mean)	-	Sem 1- 3.8 Sem 1- 3.8	Sem 1- 3.9 Sem 1- 3.9	Sem 2- 3.9 Sem 2- 3.9
Research Student Satisfaction Survey All performance items (mean) Overall Satisfaction (mean)		3.31 3.64		3.54 3.89
International Student Survey (% first choice UWS)	-	-	57.0	58.0
Employer Survey (% better or much better quality of the UWS graduates compared to those from other universities)	13.0	-	-	23.9
Survey of Indigenous Student Experience All performance items (mean) Overall Satisfaction (mean)			3.52 3.35	3.53 3.80
Retention Survey (% OK/good/excellent) Quick and convenient enrolment Handling of administrative problems Experience using WebCT		67.5 47.3 91.2	78.2 61.7 96.2	

Lessons Learnt from the Audit

The trial and the actual AUQA audits at UWS appeared to be very well organised and coordinated. The Office of Planning and Quality received praise notes from various participants including the audit board members, staff and students on the audit organisation and administration. OPQ was commended by the Vice-Chancellor's Excellence Award in 2006 for its professional service. At the same time, there are lessons learnt from the audit that might be valuable to other institutions expecting a similar external review in the near future.

These lessons include:

▪ Having a Project Manager who is responsible for the entire audit process with good secretarial and administrative support. The Project Manager should be familiar with the University operations, quality management in higher education and also with the AUQA audit process itself.

- The trial audit has to include offshore partners and programs. Neither the UWS trial audit nor the UWS Review of Offshore programs included offshore visits to review offshore quality assurance processes, visiting partners and students.

- The design of the performance portfolio, including the selections of art work and pictures should be done before the trial audit. This would allow the designers to spend more time on enhancing the designs and layout of the final document.

- It appears important to visit each venue at least two-three months before the audit. This would allow the assessment of the interview rooms and requests for refurbishment if required.

- While both undergraduate and postgraduate student associations helped OPQ in the audit preparations, an area for improvement could be organising campus forums with students on quality issues and engaging them more effectively.

- Ensure that the performance portfolio and supplementary materials provide an accurate reflection of activities and that all statements are evidence based. This aligns well with the Curtin University of Technology AUQA audit experience (Adams, 2003).

- Discussion with other multi-campus institutions that have already been audited (onshore and offshore) would facilitate sharing of experiences. UWS experience also shows that networking with staff from other universities involved in AUQA audit preparations is very useful;

- Using the AUQA Progress Report as a mean to consistently address areas where improvement is needed and to gain momentum.

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