

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES QUALITY AGENCY

AUQA AUDITS - 2007 ONWARDS Overview of Audit Cycle 2

Executive Summary

Context

In 2007, AUQA will finish auditing the current self-accrediting institutions (SAIs) and the accreditation agencies. From 2008, it will begin a second cycle of audits of these bodies (as well as auditing some institutions for the first time).

Suggestions for cycle 2 were sought and received from AUQA's constituency and via the review of AUQA. In deciding what to recommend to the AUQA Members on the nature of cycle 2, the Board of AUQA set out to achieve a balance between two objectives. On the one hand, it is important for the next audits to be sufficiently similar to the first ones to help to bed down QA processes and reinforce aspects that have become established in internal institutional processes, and because the system has proved to be effective. On the other hand, it is important for successive audit cycles to be different to avoid staleness, complacency and diminishing returns, to recognise the changing character of the system and the institutions, and to emphasise continuing improvement.

Detailed processes and advice for cycle 2 will be further developed by AUQA, informed by

- national briefing sessions with SAIs and HE Recognition Officers, and
- a sector-based reference group.

Cycle 2 Audits - Main Similarities to Cycle 1

- A fitness *for* purpose audit against institutional / agency objectives (recognising diversity of SAIs and consistency between agencies)
- An emphasis on quality enhancement / improvement
- Use of the ADRI framework
- Audit reports containing Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations
- Acknowledgement of the benefit and importance of self-review
- Avoidance of ranking systems
- Attention to international activities
- Good practices shared through mechanisms such as AUQA's Good Practice Database
- Approximately six-year audit cycle for SAIs

Cycle 2 Audits - Main Differences from Cycle 1

1. Update

- "Closing the loop" on recommendations and affirmations from cycle one audits
- Overview of main quality assurance procedures, with emphasis on changes since cycle one.
- Streamline (and attempt to reduce) documentation.

2. Standards, Benchmarking and Outcomes

- The audit approach will explicitly encompass standards, performance and outcomes, guided by consideration of academic risk and its management.

- Greater emphasis on institutional standards and performance outcomes, with attention to benchmarking activities and their effect on standards and outcomes.
- Audits will investigate how academic standards are determined, applied, maintained, monitored and met.
- Greater use of external reference points.
- Evidence of the relation between processes and outcomes will be sought.

3. Audit Depth

- Identification of two thematic areas for detailed attention.

4. Audit Reports

- Recommendations and affirmations in audit reports, identifying areas requiring action, will be prioritised on a three or four-point scale (eg high, medium, low), as advice to the auditee.

5. Agencies

- Agencies will be audited in 2010.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2005, AUQA issued a discussion paper outlining options for the form and type of cycle 2 audits of self-accrediting institutions (SAIs), including universities, and agencies. Some input on this was also received through the review of AUQA.

Feedback revealed that there is strong support for a continuation of the whole-of-institution audits, reinforcing the continuous improvement momentum from cycle one, with effectiveness and efficiency of audits seen as important. Respondents indicated support for increased attention to outcomes and standards, emphasis on a small number of themes, and clearer specification of and reduction in documentation.

For agencies, the preference is for an audit of all agencies in one year across a spectrum of their activities.

2. SAIs – OVERVIEW OF AUDIT SCOPE

The areas of focus for auditing SAIs during cycle 2 will be as follows:

- Progress since cycle one on recommendations and affirmations, and on the quality assurance system more generally
- Two identified themes

2.1 Progress since Cycle One

AUQA Audit Report

Recognising the importance of quality enhancement and improvement, the audits will consider whether the recommendations and affirmations in the last AUQA audit report have been implemented, and the areas of commendation maintained. A sample of these will be selected by AUQA and checked. It is expected that the necessary evidence will be contained in existing institutional implementation plans (although additional, existing, evidence could be requested).

Changes to Quality Systems and Processes

AUQA will seek evidence of the increasing effectiveness of the institution's quality assurance and improvement system/framework since cycle one. Areas for consideration in describing institutional systems will be provided to guide development of the performance portfolio. (Some will already have been covered in the progress report.)

2.2 Academic Standards and Outcomes

Evidence of setting, maintaining and reviewing institutional academic standards and outcomes (eg relating to student progress, student achievement, graduate attributes, research achievements) will be expected, together with evidence of the institution's comparative national and international performance, and that professional accreditation requirements are being met. AUQA will take cognisance of a number of issues in attempting to assess standards, including the nature of comparators; the use of direct and indirect measures; and variations between different fields.

AUQA will seek evidence of the achievement of and performance against academic objectives, including the use of targets, performance indicators, specified outcomes and trend data. Evidence of the relation between processes and outcomes will be emphasised, both in the performance portfolio and within AUQA audit reports.

These issues will be addressed in relation to the themes selected. Depending on the selected themes, research performance (including the Research Quality Framework), teaching performance (eg GDS/CEQ, Learning and Teaching Performance Fund) and other aspects of institutional assessment (eg Institutional Assessment Framework) measures may be considered, while recognising that priority measures and targets should be established by each institution in line with its own objectives.

As relevant to the themes selected, the audit will investigate:

- How are standards in these areas determined and updated? What input is there from internal and external stakeholders?
- What processes are in place to assure consistent implementation of the standards across the institution?
- How are outcomes monitored?
- How are standards compared nationally? How are they compared internationally? What explicit benchmarking has there been to compare standards? How frequently does this occur?
- What is the result of the national and/or international comparisons of outcomes or content?
- How is this information used to improve and update standards? How frequently does this occur?

In considering the nature and use of each institution's benchmarking activities, the audits will recognise that different forms of benchmarking (and other means of comparing information and performance) are used in the sector.

2.3 External Reference Points

Audits will maintain a fitness for purpose approach as it is essential to recognise and reinforce the diversity and differentiation of objectives across the sector. However, external reference points, including the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes, each auditee's enabling legislation, and other recognised national and international standards / guidelines and good practice principles as appropriate to the themes being audited, will be used more explicitly during audits. External reference points may provide the minimum requirements against which the institution may report the level of its performance, and reference to compliance with relevant provisions will be included in audit reports.

For SAIs, other external reference points specified by them and/or relevant to the identified audit themes will also be used.

External reference points may include:

- AVCC Code of Practice for Provision of Education to International Students
- AVCC: Universities and their Students: Principles for Provision of Education by Australian Universities
- AVCC Policy Guidelines on Cross-Sector Qualifications Linkages
- Professional accreditation
- National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes
- MCEETYA Good practice principles for Credit Transfer and Articulation from VET to Higher Education
- Australian Qualifications Framework

- National Governance Protocols
- ESOS Act and associated Code
- Quality Audit Factors to be used for NSAs
- UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education
- Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

AUQA will be looking for evidence that institutions have considered the purpose and intentions of the relevant external reference points and taken appropriate and effective action.

2.4 Two Themes – to be determined

In consultation with the auditee, AUQA will determine two themes for particular emphasis during the audit. In selecting these themes, AUQA will have regard to: areas of academic risk and its management, cycle one outcomes, findings of the latest IAF report, and areas of particular importance to the institution. It is expected that attention to the institution's own review procedures will guide the risk assessment and assist in minimising the amount of specially-written documentation required. The intention is that the themes be 'narrow' enough that the increased depth does not increase the overall scale of the audit.

The themes will be selected, based on discussions with the institution, approximately 12 months in advance of the scheduled audit visit. This selection will be informed by a reflection on specific issues of academic risk for that auditee, and the management of that risk.

At least for the early part of cycle 2, it is likely that one theme will be areas of international activity. This includes one or more of the following, depending on the nature and objectives of the institution:

- Arrangements for the teaching and learning of international students in Australia
- Arrangements for teaching and learning of international students offshore (including partner arrangements and campuses)
- Internationalisation of the curriculum and overall student experience (eg including student mobility, staffing arrangements)
- Other international activities, such as research collaboration.

One theme could be a particular discipline or field of education, which would be sampled for evidence of external comparison of the standards. Other possible themes are research training, staff matters and workforce planning, IT for teaching and learning, teaching evaluation and enhancement, credit transfer and articulation arrangements, research centres and support, commercial activities, or dual-sector structures.

Institutions will be expected to provide: evidence of self-review of the themes or thematic areas (using a continuous improvement cycle such as the ADRI framework), outcomes of benchmarking, indication of how processes are linked to outcomes, and a description of processes in place to assure alignment with relevant external reference points. Auditing of the themes will, as appropriate, take an institution-wide approach, with focused sampling, taking into account the primary areas/sites and modes applicable to the theme to be covered. Aspects of the nature of the portfolio and the audit procedure can be considered when the themes are selected.

3. AGENCIES – OVERVIEW OF AUDIT SCOPE

3.1 Progress since Cycle One

AUQA Audit Report

Recognising the importance of quality enhancement and improvement, the audits will consider whether the recommendations and affirmations in the last AUQA audit report have been implemented, and the areas of commendation maintained. A sample of these will be selected by AUQA and checked. It is expected that the necessary evidence will be contained in existing agency implementation plans (although additional, existing, evidence could be requested).

Changes to Quality Systems and Processes

AUQA will seek evidence of the increasing effectiveness of the agency's quality assurance and improvement system/framework since cycle one.

Outcomes

Audits will be based on an agency's analysis of outcomes against its priorities related to higher education, with trend data to track improvements over time and specified targets to identify planned improvements for the future.

In reviewing an agency's outcomes since cycle one, AUQA will consider standards of client NSAs and progress towards achieving greater national consistency across jurisdictions.

3.2 Implementation of National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes

The audit will consider

- whether legislation and guidelines accurately express the Protocols;
- whether the Agency effectively implements the legislation/guidelines; and
- where applicable, effectiveness of approach to audit of HEPs

3.3 Identified Theme

AUQA will aim to work with each agency to identify one theme of particular interest for the audit (for example mutual recognition, workforce planning processes) based on cycle one audits and/or national priorities.

The theme will be identified approximately 12 months in advance of the scheduled audit visit. A self-review (based on the existing ADRI approach) will be included in the portfolio. Explicit attention will be paid to the linking of processes to outcomes relating to the theme.

3.4 Parallel Audits

To support checking of national consistency, and to allow time for legislation to implement the revised National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes, agencies will not be audited until 2010, and all will be audited in one year.

4. CYCLE 2 DOCUMENTATION

In order to streamline (and attempt to reduce) documentation to support cycle 2 audits, several strategies will be used. These include: development of guidelines on core information required in the performance portfolio; a focus on the period since cycle one (building on information already provided to AUQA); the reduced audit scope; and reviewing evidence through electronic media/web wherever possible. Auditees will also be expected to contribute to the reduction in documentation by keeping to the specified portfolio length.

Consistent presentation and provision of information in the portfolio is expected to reduce the need for subsequent requests for information, and the volume of material within portfolios should be reduced through addressing the main information required succinctly.

5. FIRST TIME AUDITS

Decisions taken at the 20th MCEETYA meeting in Brisbane to revise the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes are likely to result in first time audits for some new and newly classified institutions such as

- New universities (in any form);
- Institutions granted self accrediting status; and
- Some non self-accrediting institutions (NSAIs) who request an AUQA audit in order to meet Commonwealth requirements for Higher Education Provider (HEP) status.

If an institution is audited for the first time during the next five years, it will not be possible to refer to a prior AUQA audit, and it will not be appropriate to ask for a portfolio which is “an update since cycle one”. Furthermore, the audit should be comprehensive, rather than confined to specific themes. Otherwise, the audit will be as described above, with the emphasis on performance and standards, and international activities where relevant.

6. HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS (NSAIs/HEPs)

HEPs are required to be audited, and AUQA will be conducting some of these audits. (Currently, AUQA is the only named quality audit agency in the *HESA* Guidelines.) Quality audits of NSAIs/HEPs to be conducted by AUQA will be structured around consideration of institutional performance assessed against the institution’s objectives, and the criteria set out in four “Quality Audit Factors”. This combination matches the decision to make more explicit reference to external reference points within whole-of-institution fitness-for-purpose audits for SAIs in cycle 2.

It is anticipated that the HEP quality audits will be cyclical, on a similar timescale to the AUQA audits of SAIs (5 years), or in the case of audits undertaken by State and Territory accrediting agencies, synchronised with re-registration

As the quality auditing of NSAIs/HEPs is subject to pilot in 2006, and a draft handbook to guide this NSAI audit process is being developed on the basis of these pilots, this paper does not address these audits specifically.

7. AUDIT PROGRESS REPORTS

A progress report against recommendations and affirmations will be requested from auditees 12 months following publication of the audit report. As is current practice, this will be made public on the auditee’s website with a link from the AUQA website. It will remain on the auditee’s website until the next audit, but may be updated annually, with written advice to AUQA as updates are made.

The current progress report will be part of the agenda for each biennial DEST IAF visit.