

**The role of an independent quality assurance body in a climate of accountability:  
New Zealand at the crossroads**

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**Abstract**

*The New Zealand Government has initiated a new set of Tertiary Education Reforms which would see the Tertiary Education Commission requiring quality assurance bodies to provide information for the Commission 'to discharge its accountability for quality'. This paper argues that the Commission is interested in institutional accountability and performance only, and that quality assurance bodies must take on the responsibility to provide independent assessment of the quality of education and to support institutions in enhancement activities.*

This paper is about the 'emerging challenges' for one particular quality assurance agency, and the tension between 'accountability' and 'independence'.

**Three cycles of audit**

During the past twelve years, the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit [the 'Unit'] has completed three cycles of academic audits of New Zealand universities. The last cycle placed a new emphasis on each University providing its own proposed programme of quality initiatives to address deficiencies identified by the self review. Each audit report commented on these initiatives and supported or enhanced them through appropriate recommendations (see Jennings 2003). In this way, it was intended that the audit process gain a stronger enhancement focus.

Having survived three cycles of academic audit, New Zealand universities are now showing signs of 'audit fatigue', and believe that there has been diminishing value from audit in successive cycles. Universities are questioning the continuing application of significant funding, resources and time into self-reviews and other requirements associated specifically with external audit processes. The question to be faced now is 'How to move forward?', and the Unit is developing and trialling a Process Audit which would examine specific processes in considerable detail to determine their effectiveness in controlling risk and in achieving desired educational outcomes.

**The Tertiary Education Commission and the Tertiary Education Reforms**

Since 2000, the tertiary education sector in New Zealand has been subject to scrutiny by government reviews. One outcome of the 2000-2001 Tertiary Education Advisory Commission reports was the creation of the Tertiary Education Commission which began operations in 2002.<sup>1</sup> This Commission is the lead agency for managing relationships with the tertiary sector, being responsible for policy development as well as funding the Government's contribution to tertiary education. The Commission has a lead role in implementing the tertiary education reforms. (Tertiary Education Commission 2006-1).

In July 2006, the Commission released four Government Cabinet papers and appropriate Cabinet Minutes which describe a new set of Tertiary Education Reforms – papers on 'distinctive contributions of tertiary education', 'investing in a plan', 'funding the system' and 'quality assurance and monitoring' (New Zealand Cabinet 2006). The last of these papers declares early on that a quality assurance and monitoring system must support a high trust and

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<sup>1</sup> An 'Interim Tertiary Education Commission' was operational in 2002 pending legislation in 2003 under which the Commission was formally established.

high accountability environment (sections 11, 13). Quality assurance and monitoring, the paper states, relates to accountability, institutional performance and risk, and high quality teaching and learning, and must also protect public confidence (section 11).

Later, the paper considers the Commission’s ongoing responsibility in making investment decisions and monitoring tertiary education organisations’ performances. It will be important for the Commission ‘to influence and shape the nature, quality and levels of information that should be provided through quality assurance processes’ (section 48). With respect to universities, the focus of discussion between the Commission and the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (which is responsible for quality assurance and monitoring in universities through the work of its Committee on University Academic Programmes and the independent New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit) will be the future need for information and assurance in relation to the university sector as well as the relationship and processes needed ‘to ensure that the Commission is able to discharge its accountability for quality in the tertiary sector as a whole’ (section 52).

### **The Tertiary Education Commission’s view of quality**

The Commission made a presentation about the Tertiary Education Reforms to the annual meeting of all universities’ ‘quality’ personnel in September 2006. Subtitled ‘Focusing on the impact on student learning’ (Tertiary Education Commission 2006-2), the presentation did not, in fact, focus on the impact on student learning, but rather on government strategies and priorities, budget certainty for government, a network of provision, demonstrating institutional performance outcomes, and meeting quality assurance requirements.

The last slide of the presentation defined the characteristics of the quality assurance and monitoring in the new system. The table below sets out those characteristics in the left column, and I offer comment in the right column.

<i>TEC presentation</i>	<i>Comment</i>
<i>Quality assurance and monitoring in the new system will</i>	
• <i>focus on outcomes, not inputs</i>	Outcomes or outputs? What are the outcomes of education? What about adequacy of funding streams, diversity of student profiles, diversity of student experience, diversity of student intentions, diversity of stakeholder requirements, capability and expectations at entry, adequacy of resources and support that impact on delivery and learning?
• <i>ensure accountability</i>	With respect to what? Institutional performance or quality of learning?
• <i>include sector, sub-sector and institutional indicators</i>	Of what? Institutional performance or quality of learning? Who will use indicators? What use will be made of indicators?
• <i>provide reliable, valid and meaningful information</i>	For whom? Students, institutions, professions, employers, academic communities, stakeholders, or government? What kind of information does each of these interest groups desire?
• <i>balance self-assessment with on-going external review and validation.</i>	For what purpose? Accountability for past performance, or responsibility for further enhancement of quality?

The inevitable conclusion to be drawn is that the Commission is interested in measuring institutional performance and student outputs/outcomes against government priorities, not the quality of institutional research, teaching, learning, community engagement and the student learning experience. The Commission is interested in institutional performance with respect to the delivery of quality programmes in agreed areas.

A focus on outcomes is of concern. Crombie and Davies (1998), in urging a balance between outcomes and processes in evaluating the quality of health care, point out that outcome measures which identify failures of care do not necessarily identify where those deficiencies lie. Instead, further work is required to identify which of the processes of care may be at fault, because only then can remedial action be taken. Process investigation can help ensure that professional good intentions are turned into good professional practice. The challenge for process is the need for evidence of appropriateness, to demonstrate that a process does have a worthwhile outcome.

The expectation that indicators will provide ‘reliable, valid and meaningful information’ begs the question ‘For whom?’ McDaniel (1996) warns that whatever performance indicators might be, account must be made of the uses to be made of performance indicators by different interest groups. University administrators and higher education specialists want indicators that tell about academic evaluation (reputation of staff, peer review of teaching, percentage of PhD staff) and outputs (in particular, the number of PhDs); politicians want indicators that tell about inputs (entrance qualification, teacher qualifications) and outputs (completion rates). Businesses are interested in inputs and student evaluations; students are interested in qualifications necessary for entry and the prospect of employment upon graduation.

### **What is the role of the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit?**

The Commission must assure the Government that money is being well spent; the Unit, however, must support universities in enhancing their research activity, their teaching and learning environment, and community engagement as benchmarked against international expectations of university education.

The Unit’s terms of reference makes it clear that the Unit is *accountable to each university individually* through external academic audit of mechanisms for monitoring and enhancing the ongoing academic quality of academic programmes, their delivery and their learning outcomes, and the extent to which the universities are achieving stated aims and objectives in these areas and processes. The Unit is also *accountable to the universities collectively* by assisting the university sector to improve its educational quality, and by advising the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors’ Committee on quality assurance matters. The Unit’s Constitution requires that ‘The Unit acts as a *fully independent body* in the conduct of its audit activities’.

There are signs that planning for tertiary education in New Zealand will be incentive driven – funding to run courses required by Government, to steer the system towards government goals. In my view, a quality assurance and monitoring system in such a context that concentrates on the analysis of output indicators which tell about the performance of institutions (rather than about the quality of the research and learning experience and student engagement) runs the risk of developing an environment in which the impact of education and learning is only as can be measured – by the completion of assessment tasks, the accumulation of credits, the gaining of employment. The true outcomes of education are open and unknown, and relate to the contribution to society made by those who engage in learning. Designing an education system to meet the vision of the Government in terms of its objectives for society runs the risk of encouraging a culture of provider compliance rather than one of enhanced educational provision.

At the moment, quality assurance bodies in New Zealand are waiting to hear what it is that the Commission requires of them. I believe that this is misguided. The Commission must acknowledge that its role is solely that of providing Government assurance of institutional accountability and performance, and value for money.

The Unit’s role must be the independent assessment of the quality of education and the support of enhancement activities that encourage a climate of trust and responsibility; that lessen the costs and burden on universities; that support universities to look back and to look forward through critical self review and reflection in ways that lead to quality enhancement of core

activities; and that grow out of and feed into the values, cultures and characteristics of universities (refer Jennings 2004). That is the challenge now faced by the Unit.

That is the challenge now faced by the Unit, and, I suggest, other New Zealand quality assurance bodies. Quality assurance agencies must be accountable to their primary stakeholders – the education providers – while providing independent advice on the quality of teaching and learning to the Tertiary Education Commission to assist it to be accountable to Government for institutional performance. In my view, quality assurance agencies in New Zealand must stake their claim to make independent quality assessments now, before it is too late.

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