



Academic Quality in
New Zealand
Universities: An
analysis of academic
audit findings
2008 - 2012

*Te Pokapū Kōunga Mātauranga
mō ngā Whare Wānanga o Aotearoa*

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Introduction

Academic audit has been an important part of the New Zealand university quality assurance landscape since the first academic audits of universities were conducted in 1995. In the subsequent 17 years, four cycles of audit have been completed, and New Zealand's universities have grown and shifted in size and focus. Significant changes in technology, in funding, in location, in staffing and in the student body are reflected in the institutions that exist today, and also in their approach to the assurance of high-quality teaching and learning in a research-led environment.

Academic audits are, necessarily, a snapshot of a university at a point in time. Cycle 4 audits were administered over the period 2008-2012 and considered the goals of an institution with regard to the quality of their teaching and learning, and their approach to achieving those goals. Systems, processes and strategies were explored and tested. The result was a series of commendations for good practice, affirmation of new and underway actions, and recommendations for areas in need of further improvement. The focus was, and remains, on enhancing quality through continuous improvement.

This short analysis looks back at Cycle 4 academic audits to explore common strengths and challenges. In the first part of this report, we update the thematic analysis released part-way through Cycle 4 in "Series on Quality 11: A Thematic Overview of Institutional Audit 2000 – 2010".¹ As the focus is on exploring commonality, individual universities are not identified. However, full audit reports are available from the AQA website.²

The analysis then explores Cycle 4 audit findings through the lens of a quality assurance cycle. Audit recommendations and commendations can be found to correspond with different stages of the cycle (identified here as Planning, Implementing, Monitoring, Evaluating, Improving and Feedback). This analysis provides a unique look at where universities' strengths in quality assurance lay in Cycle 4, and the areas in which academic audit panels found opportunities for further improvement.

Finally, and looking forward to a fifth cycle of academic audits, Cycle 4 audit findings have been related to seven "Academic Activities". These activities form the framework for the Cycle 5 audits commencing in the second-half of 2013. The analysis reveals which of the academic activities have been a major focus to date, and suggests which areas might be expected to receive additional attention in this next cycle of audits.

It is hoped that this analysis provides universities and other interested parties with a sector-wide view of university quality assurance during the period 2008 – 2012, and provides an indication of areas that are likely to be of particular focus in 2013 and beyond. Further information about Cycle 5 audits and the new framework can be found on our website: www.aqa.ac.nz/cycle5.

*Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities*³
March 2013

¹ NZUAAU, 2011. *Series on Quality 11: A Thematic Overview of Institutional Audit 2000 – 2010*. Available online: www.aqa.ac.nz/SeriesonQuality11

² www.aqa.ac.nz/cycle4

³ Formerly known as the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (name change effective 1 January 2013)

A Note about Audit Findings

While all universities in each cycle were audited within the same audit framework for that cycle, there is intrinsic variability within the process which inevitably impacts on the analysis being attempted in this paper.

Number of findings

Audit report recommendations and commendations vary in their level of specificity. Some are very broad while others are more specific. As a result, the raw number of recommendations and commendations made in each university audit and across cycles of audit does not necessarily reflect a difference in academic quality but may be a response by audit panels to the level of specificity of universities' self-review reports and/or reflect the style preferences of individual audit panels when crafting their reports.

With only eight universities, this analysis is limited by small numbers ($n = 213$ audit findings within Cycle 4). As a result, care should be taken in drawing conclusions from small numbers of findings in some areas of analysis. Given the small dataset, the focus has been on exploring commonality across the sector rather than variance.

Scope of findings

This analysis is based on the formal recommendations, commendations and affirmations contained within published audit reports. These are the areas that audit panels felt warranted particular attention, either for acknowledged good practice (in the case of commendations) or in need of further improvement (in the case of recommendations) or because audits reflect, in part, the particular emphasis and distinctive characteristics of the universities. The receipt of a recommendation requires a response by the university in their 12-month follow-up report (which will be considered for its adequacy by the Board of AQA) and in the following cycle of audit. However, audit panels will have necessarily covered a variety of other areas in the audit framework, many of which may not have necessitated an official audit finding. As a result, this analysis may represent a narrower overview of auditors' areas of exploration, and of the strengths and weaknesses of universities with regard to quality assurance than an exploration of the full text of academic audit reports will reveal.

Historical nature of findings

This is an historical snapshot, with Cycle 4 academic audits completed between 2008 and 2012. As a result, areas identified for recommendation may have already received attention from the universities or might no longer be relevant. It also needs to be noted that over the timeframe of the audits (2008 – 2012), the external environments and internal imperatives of the universities have changed, potentially affecting priorities for focus. e.g., changes in the funding model are likely to have had an impact on admission strategies and student profiles (with subsequent impact on student support and teaching and learning needs).

Notwithstanding the above caveats, AQA believes this analysis is informative and relevant for what it says about the universities during this snapshot of time.

Executive Summary

- There were eight audits and 213 audit findings in Cycle 4: 83 recommendations, 80 commendations and 50 affirmations. This is broadly similar to the number of commendations and total findings made in Cycle 3 (2002 – 2007). Recommendations have fallen in each cycle since 2000, while the number of commendations has remained relatively static, most likely to be attributable to a general maturing of universities' quality processes over this time, as well as a maturing of the academic audit model.
- Within Cycle 4, management and governance, and teaching and learning received the most recommendations, but also the most commendations. Institutional quality assurance systems received the most recommendations across all areas of audit, while incorporating and responding to student feedback was the central recurring theme of recommendations in the area of teaching and learning.
- A number of universities made significant changes and investment in their library and information service facilities and resources between Cycle 3 and Cycle 4 audits and received commendations for their progress. Universities' student support services and campus life were also the focus of many Cycle 4 commendations.
- Postgraduate student enrolment and support received several commendations, with universities' plans for further improvements in this area affirmed. At the same time, most universities received recommendations with regard to the consistency of quality in postgraduate supervision across the university and across different modes of delivery.
- Overall, mode of delivery was a major theme for Cycle 4 audits, with several universities receiving recommendations related to the use of technology in courses, including ensuring staff had access to adequate support and training.
- The commitment of several universities to the advancement of Māori students and staff received commendations (although recommendations for others), while a high level of commitment to the advancement of Pacific students and staff emerged during Cycle 4 audits.
- Universities' staff policies and practices received commendations during this time, and affirmations for progress yet to be seen. However, audit panels found that more could be done with regard to staff training and development and to ensuring appropriately constructed staff workload policies and processes.
- In an analysis of findings by stages in the quality assurance (QA) cycle, the distribution of Cycle 4 audit findings varied considerably. Consistent with international experience, much of the universities' efforts appeared to be concentrated in two QA stages: planning and implementing. While audit panels' recommendations during this period were relatively evenly spread around the entire QA cycle, universities received few commendations in the monitoring, evaluating, improving and feedback stages of the QA cycle.
- A look at Cycle 4 findings through a lens of the new Cycle 5 framework reveals that universities might expect shifts in the areas of commendations and recommendations they receive. Analysis suggest than an increased emphasis on student profile and student engagement is likely, while curriculum and assessment and the supervision of research students are likely to continue to come under audit panel scrutiny. This new framework of guideline statements can be seen to be reflective of shifts occurring internationally to build on progress made to date within universities and the evolution of external quality assurance practices accordingly.

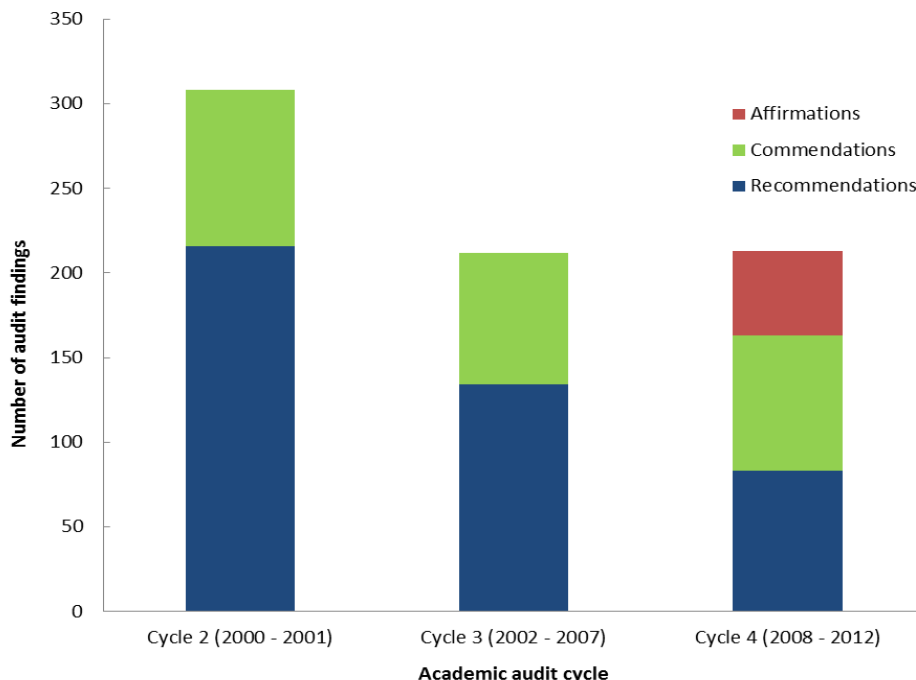
1. Cycle 4 Academic Audit Findings

The New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit was established by the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee in 1993. Now known as the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) the Agency carried out its first cycle of institutional audits of New Zealand universities between 1995 and 1998. Subsequent audits were carried out in 2000 and 2001 (with a focus on research and another theme selected by institutions) and between 2002 and 2007 (with a focus on teaching and learning). The fourth cycle of audits commenced in 2008 and concluded in 2012 and had a focus on the academic quality of the whole of institutions.

AQA audit reports consist of commentary and a series of affirmations, commendations and recommendations made by an independent panel of 4 – 5 academic auditors. Trained auditors bring to the audit process their prior knowledge and experience of universities, of academic quality, and of quality assurance frameworks and processes, both nationally and internationally. The audit report reflects the panel's collective view following consideration of: the self-review portfolio of the institution (based on the university's own strategic objectives and related to the nominated foci of the audit); supporting materials and documentation provided by the university; and interviews and discussions with staff, students and other university stakeholders.

In Cycle 4, there were eight audits and 213 audit findings: 83 recommendations, 80 commendations and 50 affirmations.⁴ This is broadly similar to the number of commendations and total findings made in Cycle 3 (2002 – 2007). As shown in Figure 1, recommendations have fallen in each cycle since 2000, while the number of commendations has remained relatively static.

Figure 1: AQA academic audit findings by type (2000 – 2012)



⁴ AQA audit reports make **recommendations** for further improvement, **commend** good practices, and **affirm** activities recently initiated by universities to enhance academic quality, but for which evidence of outcomes is not yet available. Audit panels do not normally commend practices that, while good, are already common practice across the New Zealand university sector.

Affirmations were introduced in Cycle 4. Broadly speaking, there are two types of affirmations made by audit panels: first, affirmation of activities which, if not already underway, were in areas which might have been subject to a recommendation and, secondly, affirmation of activities which might have received a commendation if they were further developed but lacked adequate evidence of positive outcomes at the time of the audit.

As a result, it is difficult to know how Figure 1 might have presented if affirmations had not been added in Cycle 4. But it is likely that recommendations would still number fewer than in Cycle 3, and commendations would have exceeded the two previous cycles. Overall, there was a similar number of audit findings in Cycles 3 and 4 (about one third fewer than in Cycle 2). It is AQA's view that this trend is most likely to be attributable to a general maturing of universities' quality assurance processes over this time, as well as a maturing of the academic audit model.

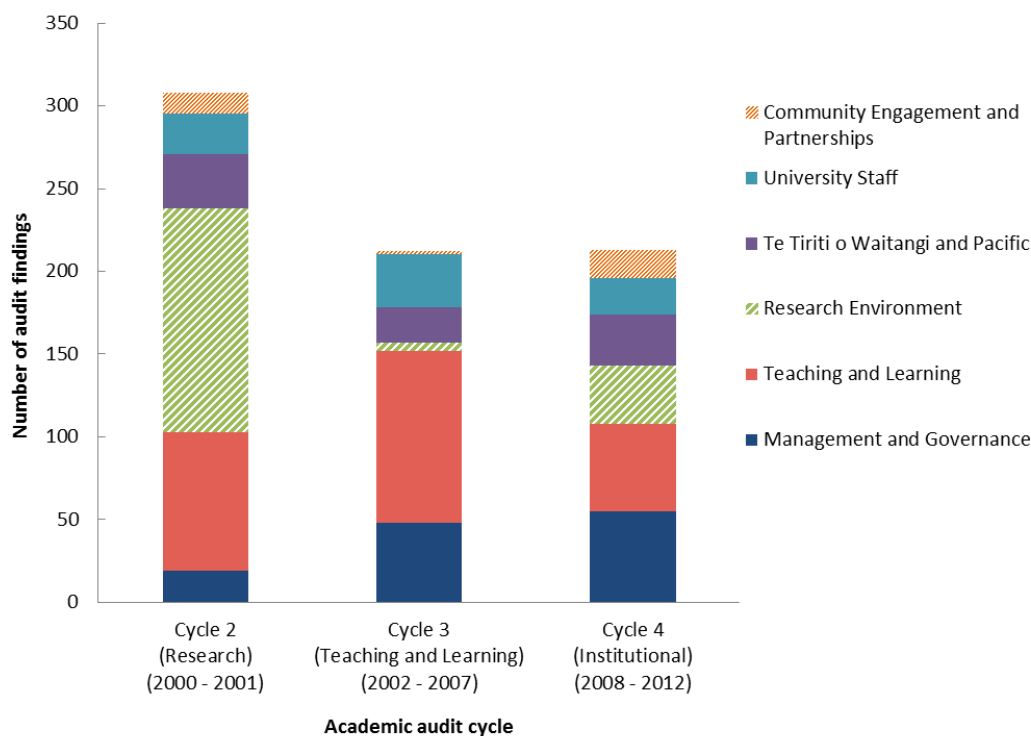
2. Thematic Analysis

Within the overall audit framework, AQA academic audit panels focus their attention on areas of particular importance to the individual universities. In Cycle 4, audit panels were guided by university delivery and learning outcomes, along with stated objectives and plans for quality enhancement. Due to the different strategic objectives of universities and the varying emphases of audit panels, it is not possible (nor necessarily relevant) to compare and track commendations and recommendations across the universities. What does emerge, however, is a picture of the themes common to some or all of the eight universities during this most recent cycle of audit.

While all audit findings are broadly related to ‘academic quality’, the framework for Cycle 4 audits breaks this down into specific themes of enquiry. Here these are summarised as: Management and Governance (including institutional quality assurance systems); teaching and learning; research environment (as related to teaching and to postgraduate students); Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Pacific; university staff (both academic and non-academic); and community engagement and partnerships (national and international).

As shown in Figure 2, and previously explored in 2011’s “A Thematic Overview of Institutional Audit 2000 – 2010”, the proportion and number of recommendations and commendations related to management and governance, including strategic planning and internal structure and communication, grew in each audit cycle. The chosen focus on research in Cycle 2 and on teaching and learning in Cycle 3 are evident, while a more constant spread of emphasis across all areas in Cycle 4 is reflective of the ‘whole of institution’ approach adopted for Cycle 4.⁵

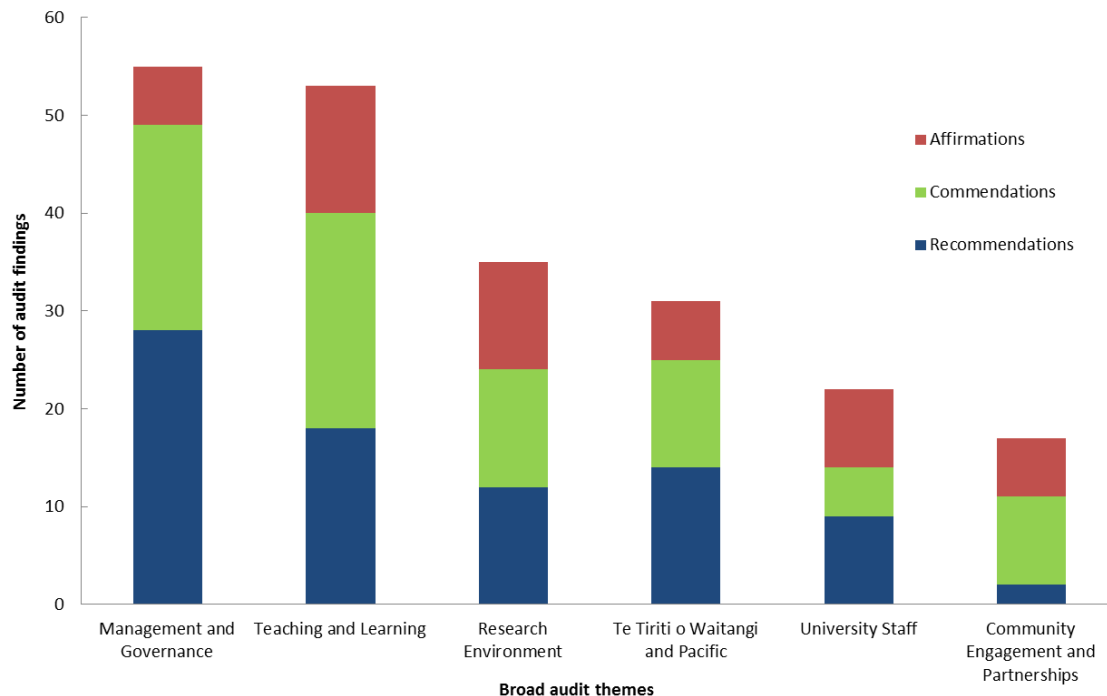
Figure 2: AQA academic audit findings by broad audit theme (2000 – 2012)



⁵ The introduction of the Performance-Based Research Fund and accompanying quality evaluation in 2003 also reduced the emphasis the NZUAAU (now AQA) placed on assessing research quality, so as to avoid duplication of effort within the sector. Since the advent of PBRF, AQA academic audit frameworks have focused on research only so much as it interacts and informs teaching and learning, including the experience and environment of postgraduate research students.

Within Cycle 4, and as show in Figure 3, management and governance, and teaching and learning received the most attention in audit findings. These areas received the most recommendations, but also the most commendations.

Figure 3: Cycle 4 academic audit findings by broad audit theme (2008 – 2012)



What did audit panels commend in Cycle 4?

Within the broad area of management and governance, all universities received commendations for some aspect of their approach to strategic planning, to collegiality and/or to internal communication during this time.

Within teaching and learning, a number of universities made significant changes and investment in their library and information service facilities and resources, and received commendations for their progress. Student support services and campus life were also a particular focus during this period, for which many universities received commendations.

Within the research environment, postgraduate student enrolment and support received several commendations, with universities' plans for further improvements in this area also affirmed.

The commitment of several universities to the advancement of Māori students and staff received commendations (although recommendations for others), while initiatives to support Māori and Pacific students received commendation and affirmation. Overall, a high level of commitment to the advancement of Pacific students and staff emerged during Cycle 4 audits.

Universities' staff appointment, induction, training and development policies and practices received commendations during this time, and affirmations for progress yet to be seen. However, still more can be achieved in this area (refer recommendations overleaf).

Universities' engagement with their communities was a particular focus of audit panel findings in Cycle 4, with many universities receiving commendations for their efforts with regard to stakeholder engagement and their relationships with local, national and special communities.

Which areas emerged in audit panels' recommendations in Cycle 4?

AQA's 2011 overview of themes in audits over the previous decade found several recurrent themes spanning most, if not all, universities during this time. With only half of Cycle 4 completed, the evaluation of teaching (including responding to student feedback) was the most prominent theme of recommendations between 2000 and 2010. This updated analysis confirmed that incorporating and responding to student feedback remained the highest recurring theme of recommendations in the area of teaching and learning. While plans for improvement in this area emerged during Cycle 4 and were affirmed by audit panels, recommendations for further improvement were received by many universities.

However, looking across all themes, and now incorporating the remaining Cycle 4 audits conducted in 2011 and 2012, institutional quality assurance policies, processes and systems received the single most recommendations in Cycle 4. A number of universities received recommendations that they ensure that they have a coherent quality assurance framework with elements that can promote planning, monitoring, review and improvement for the benefit of high quality teaching and learning. Risk management also emerged as an area in which audit panels suggested improvements could be made.

While the strategic planning of universities received many commendations in Cycle 4 (above), this area also received recommendations in particular for how strategies for teaching and learning are established, communicated and monitored. Similarly, while a number of universities made good progress with regard to their commitment to Māori students and staff, still more room was found for improvement and this was a major area for recommendations. In particular, audit panels suggested some universities could do more to implement strategies and to monitor and evaluate the institution's progress in this area.

Postgraduate supervision and examination received much attention in Cycle 4 audit panels, and most universities received recommendations, particularly with regard to the consistency of supervision across the university and across different modes of delivery.

Audit panels also found that more could be done with regard to staff training and development, and the adoption and implementation of appropriate staff workload policies and processes.

Overall, mode of delivery was a major theme for Cycle 4 audits, with several universities receiving recommendations regarding the use of technology in courses, including ensuring staff had access to appropriate support and training.

3. Quality Assurance Cycle Analysis

An alternative way to reflect on the Cycle 4 audit findings is by stages within the quality assurance cycle.⁶ The academic quality assurance (QA) cycle of a university will include key elements expected of any quality assurance framework, often described as: plan, do, check, and act. For the purposes of this analysis, reflecting the emphasis of the Cycle 4 framework and of audit panels over the past decade, we have expanded this to six stages:

- Planning
- Implementing
- Monitoring
- Evaluating
- Improving
- Feedback.

This six-stage cycle reflects the emphasis audit panels have placed on the need to not only check ('monitoring' in our QA cycle) but also to evaluate, and also the importance of feedback within the university culture. While feedback is part and parcel of every step in the QA cycle (via engagement with staff, students, and other relevant communities within a collegial environment), the reference to feedback as a discrete step in the QA cycle reflects the need for conscious communication of the results of the prior steps. e.g., providing students with information about changes that happened as result of their collective completion of course evaluation forms.

Figure 4 (page 10) shows an indicative QA cycle and examples of activities that occur in New Zealand universities under each of these stages. By looking at audit findings in light of a quality assurance cycle, we can see where universities are currently placing much of their energies and receiving commendation for doing so, and also where audit panels have found areas in need of further attention.

The distribution of Cycle 4 audit findings across the six stages varies considerably. As can be seen in Figure 5 (page 11), most audit findings were in two QA stages: *planning* and *implementing*. This could be a reflection of universities' own emphasis on self-assessment and quality objectives in these areas and/or the foci of audit panels as they worked within the Cycle 4 framework.

This observation lends weight to AQA's determination to ensure self-review processes and reports for Cycle 5 are as evaluative as possible.

⁶ While implied through the Cycle 4 academic audit framework used by AQA, several international agencies use a quality assurance cycle model more overtly to guide their evaluation of institutions' quality management systems and self-assessments. For example, agencies in Australia and Oman have used an ADRI cycle (Approach, Deployment, Results and Improvement) as the basis for their first cycles of audit.

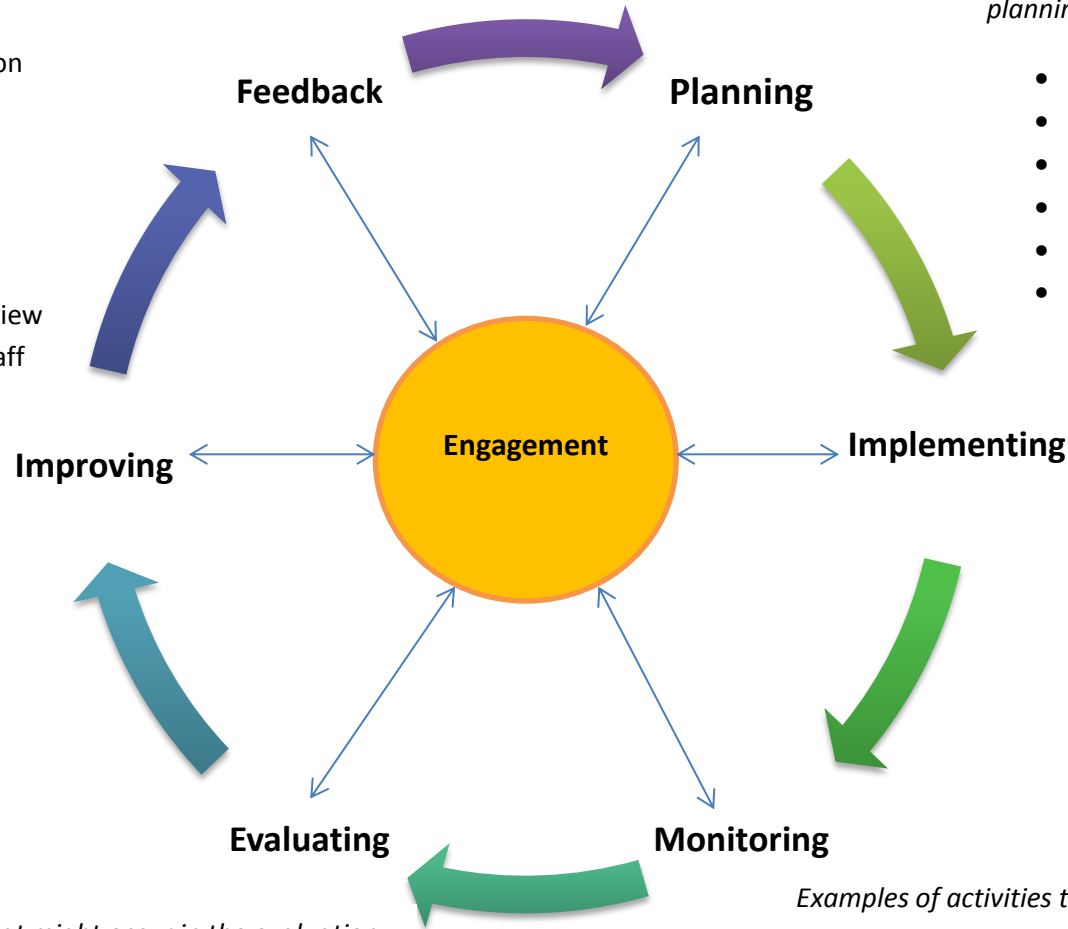
Figure 4: Indicative Academic Quality Assurance (QA) Cycle

Examples of activities that might occur in the feedback phase:

- Communication of course evaluation results
- Reports to relevant boards and committees on outcomes of monitoring activities
- Annual Report
- Submission of Graduating Year Review
- Direct feedback to students and staff

Examples of activities that might occur in the planning phase:

- Strategic planning
- Programme and course development
- CUAP approval
- Budgeting
- Workforce planning and recruitment
- Teaching and learning plans



Examples of activities that might occur in the implementation phase:

- Communication to staff
- Communication to students
- New or altered policies
- New or altered systems
- New or altered practices
- New or altered training
- New or altered facilities

Examples of activities that might occur in the improvement phase:

- Improved communications
- Proposed new or altered policies
- Proposed new or altered systems
- Proposed new or altered practices
- Proposed new or altered training
- Proposed new or altered facilities

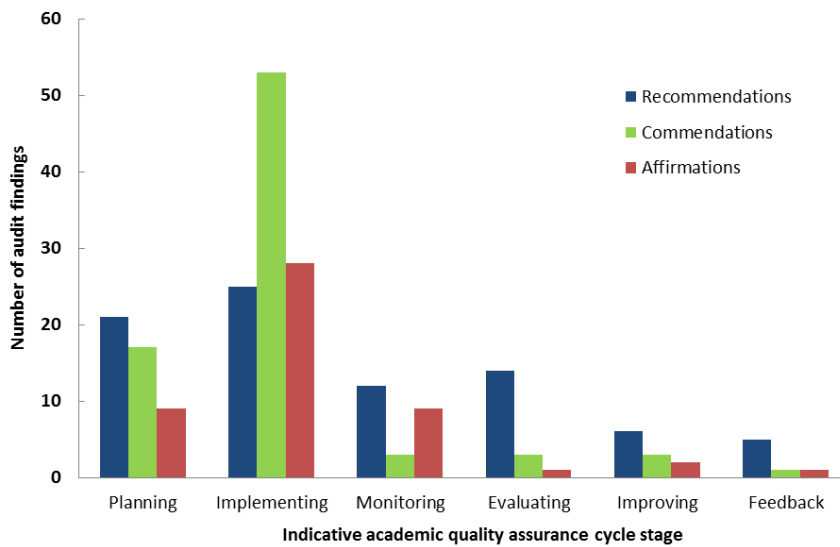
Examples of activities that might occur in the evaluation phase:

- Moderation
- Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data (e.g. course pass rates, attrition, progression)
- Consideration of review and audit outcomes
- Benchmarking
- Development reviews

Examples of activities that might occur in the monitoring phase:

- Course and teacher evaluation
- Departmental and programme reviews and reports
- Surveys and audits
- Performance reviews
- Use of external examiners
- Collection of student and staff information
- Monitoring for instances of academic dishonesty

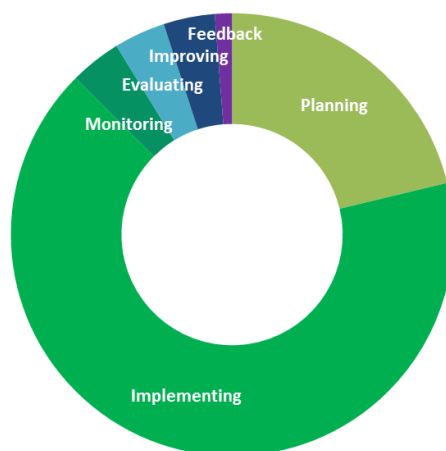
Figure 5: Cycle 4 audit findings by quality assurance cycle stage



Putting aside absolute numbers within each stage, which are very low particularly in the case of *improving* and *feedback*, and looking at the balance of types of audit findings across the cycle, we can see that audit panels have largely commended and affirmed universities’ work in terms of *implementing* quality policies, processes and systems, but have found other parts of the QA cycle in need of further attention. With regard to *planning* and *monitoring*, there are a high proportion of affirmations in both stages. If we assume that at least some affirmations might have been commendations if the audit had been held even a few months later, then the universities (collectively) can be seen to have received relatively balanced findings in these areas in Cycle 4.

Given the similar number of commendations (80) and recommendations (83) in Cycle 4, we can also visually depict the difference in distribution of these two types of findings around the QA cycle. As Figure 6 shows, Cycle 4 commendations came almost entirely from two stages in the cycle (*planning* and *implementing*) and few commendations were received in the stages of *monitoring*, *evaluating*, *improving* and *feedback*.

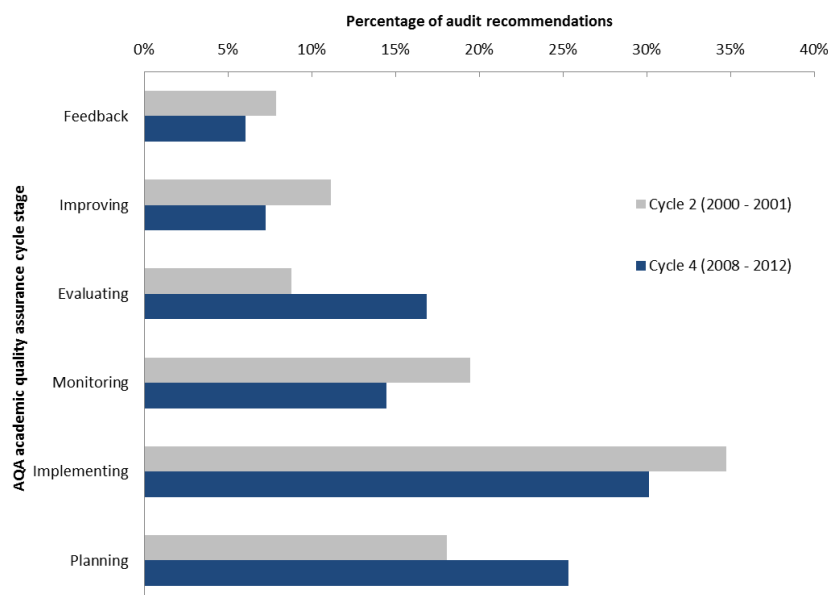
Figure 6: Cycle 4 audit commendations by QA cycle stage (n=80)



By contrast, audit recommendations made during this period were more evenly spread around the entire QA cycle. As shown in Figure 7, nearly half of recommendations were in the areas of *monitoring*, *evaluating*, *improving* and *feedback*. *Monitoring* and *evaluating*, together, accounted for nearly one-third of all recommendations, compared with only 8% of commendations.

Figure 7: Cycle 4 audit recommendations by QA cycle stage (n=83)

We can also contrast audit recommendations over time to see how the focus of audit panels and the universities has changed since the Cycle 2 audits (which commenced in 2000). It should be noted that the indicative framework of audit changed within this time; however, the integral steps of a quality assurance framework have remained constant. Figure 8 shows that, as a proportion of all recommendations, planning and evaluating received more recommendations in Cycle 4 than in Cycle 2. In the case of *planning*, this may be due to an increased focus of both universities and audit panels over the decade on the ways in which universities plan, how they involve others in that planning process, and the need for well-articulated and measurable objectives. The increased emphasis on *planning* corresponds with the introduction of investment plans for universities, and a greater emphasis on differentiation within strategic planning for all universities.

Figure 8: Cycle 2 and Cycle 4 audit recommendations by QA cycle stage

With regard to a greater emphasis on evaluation, this may be due to the evolution of universities' quality assurance processes during this time. While Cycle 2 concentrated on *monitoring* to a greater extent than *evaluating*, audit panels pressed universities further in Cycle 4 on the need to *evaluate* the outcomes of their monitoring processes.

4. Cycle 5 Academic Activities Analysis

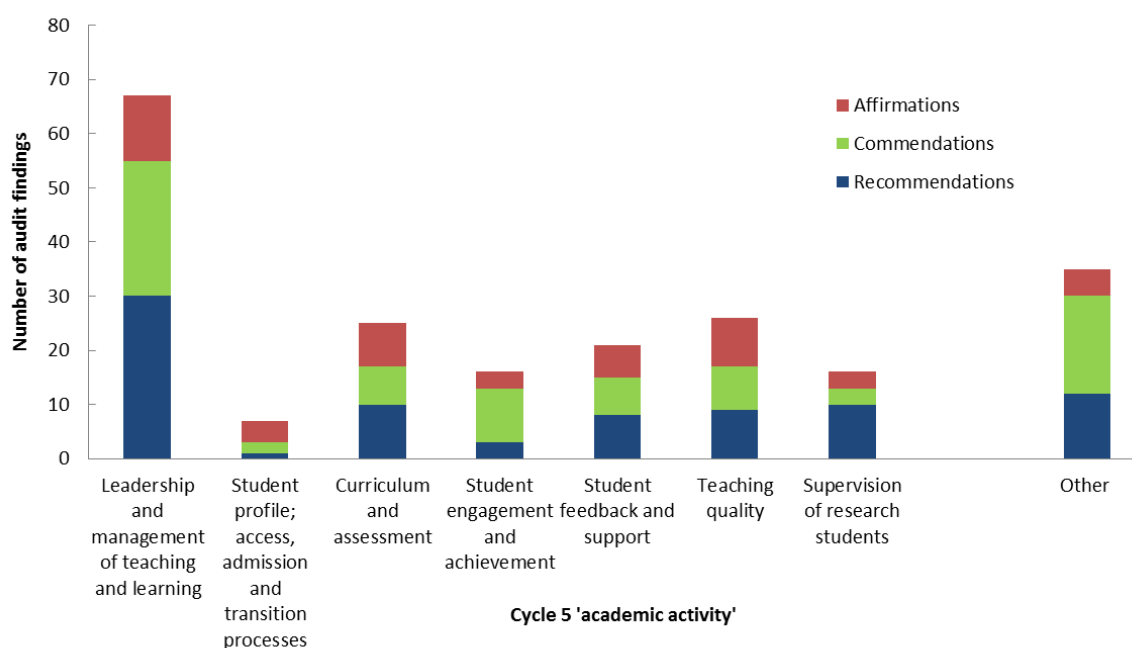
Cycle 5 academic audits will commence in the second-half of 2013. Replacing the Cycle 4 framework is a set of academic activities and guidelines statements related to teaching and learning and student support. The key academic activities which have been identified and which will form the framework for both the self-review and the academic audit are:

1. Leadership and Management of Teaching and Learning
2. Student Profile; Access, Transition and Admission Processes
3. Curriculum and Assessment
4. Student Engagement and Achievement
5. Student Feedback and Support
6. Teaching Quality
7. Supervision of Research Students.

Under each academic activity, AQA has articulated guideline statements of what AQA believes students and other stakeholders might expect of a university, and what universities might expect of each other. With the conclusion of Cycle 4, it seems appropriate to take a look at Cycle 4 findings through a Cycle 5 lens. Specifically, which academic activities were the main focuses of auditor attention in Cycle 4? And which activities have received relatively scant attention in the past, but are likely to receive greater attention in audits to come?

As shown in Figure 9, the greatest proportion of Cycle 4 audit findings would fall within the Cycle 5 academic activity area of leadership and management of teaching and learning. This activity received the most commendations, as well as the most recommendations and affirmations. The Cycle 5 academic activities with the next highest proportion of total Cycle 4 audit findings would be teaching quality, and curriculum and assessment.

Figure 9: Cycle 4 audit findings by Cycle 5 'Academic Activity'



However, after leadership and management of teaching and learning, more commendations were received for 'other' (i.e., areas of activity outside of the seven academic activities) than for any of the six remaining Cycle 5 academic activities. A full 22% of Cycle 4 commendations (and 15% of recommendations) would likely sit outside the new framework, suggesting that they may not appear as findings in a Cycle 5 audit, or at least not described in the way they were in Cycle 4. This means that at least some universities are unlikely to receive commendations in areas that were a feature of their Cycle 4 audit reports. Particular examples of these include management and governance activities that are not directly related to the leadership and management of teaching and learning, and also universities' community engagement activities except where they directly impact on the teaching and learning experience of students.

At the same time, this analysis indicates that some academic activities received less attention under the Cycle 4 framework than is likely to be the case in Cycle 5. For example, a very small number of commendations, affirmations and recommendations were related to "Student profile; Access, admission and transition processes" in Cycle 5. This does not necessarily mean there are quality issues for universities in this area or, conversely, that all is well; more likely this means that this is an area that was not covered to the same extent by university self-review documents and by AQA audit panels under the Cycle 4 framework. This is an area that we envisage receiving greater attention in Cycle 5.

This analysis also identifies which academic activities, based on Cycle 4 findings, are likely to continue to receive attention in Cycle 5. In particular, the ratio of recommendations to commendations in the supervision of research students and in the area of curriculum and assessment would suggest that these areas are likely to continue to come under university and audit panel scrutiny.

5. International Context

AQA's model of university quality assurance through academic audit is broadly similar to that undertaken by similar higher education quality assurance agencies throughout the world. Periodic external review of university quality assurance systems and processes, undertaken by peers, and underpinned by a framework of self-review and continuous improvement are common features of many countries' higher education systems.

Established in 1993, AQA is internationally recognised as one of the oldest academic external quality assurance agencies. However, many other organisations have also undertaken multiple cycles of audits or reviews, and their analysis of findings provides some context for the Cycle 4 analysis of New Zealand universities. While audit frameworks may differ in some areas, reviews of the outcomes of similar agencies in Australia, England, Scotland, and Ireland (all of whom have provided benchmarks for aspects of AQA's activities over the past two decades) suggest that New Zealand universities' Cycle 4 experience is far from unique.

For example, with regard to the uneven spread of findings across the quality assurance cycle, a review of the Australian experience found a similar result to that observed in AQA Cycle 4 audits. Looking back at the first cycle of audits undertaken by the Australian Universities Quality Agency⁷ between 2002 and 2007, analysis found that "with a few notable exceptions, most of the institutional effort had been expended at the 'front end' of the process, in developing policies, plans and processes. Closing the loop, implementation, evaluation and feedback, were much less well developed."⁸

The Irish experience echoes this, with a review of QA in the sector emphasising the need for universities to regard feedback as a distinct and critical part of the quality assurance process: "The Irish universities need to ensure coherent and regular student feedback on all courses and modules, and for this feedback to be an explicit input to the QA process"⁹.

Similarly, the uneven spread of emphasis on quality assurance in some areas of academic activity was noted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK). For example, a review of UK institutional audits found that "very few self-evaluations identified assessment of students as a priority for attention".¹⁰

With regard to the number and nature of audit findings across cycles, the experience of many agencies has been that the marginal gains from audit have fallen as quality assurance systems have been strengthened during or as a result of repeated cycles of external review. This finding can be seen reflected in changed approaches after consecutive audit or review cycles by many agencies, some of whom have since introduced a risk-based model of assurance to reflect the now-mature quality systems that exist in most higher education institutions. These shifts should not be confused with complacency. A review of the QAA (Scotland) model of Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews confirmed that while well-established and robust institutional quality assurance processes and procedures have evolved in most institutions, there is a need to build on what has been achieved, with a focus on "continued refinement and embedding of enhancement, to sustain and progress the significant culture change that is taking place".¹¹

AQA's move to a collaboratively developed set of guideline statements for the upcoming Cycle 5 audits can be seen as part of a broader international shift and reflective of an awareness of progress in the sector over the past two decades.

⁷ The Australian Universities Quality Agency has since been replaced by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA).

⁸ Ewan, Christine, 2009. "Learning and Teaching in Australian Universities: A thematic analysis of Cycle 1 AUQA Audits". Australian Learning and Teaching Council, p8.

⁹ European University Association, 2005. "Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities: A sectoral report".

¹⁰ QAA, 2008. "Outcomes from Institutional Audit: Series 1: Closing overview". p7.

¹¹ QAA (Scotland), 2007. "Learning from ELIR 2003-06. Managing assurance and enhancement: Evolution and progression. An Interim Report". p13.

6. Conclusions

New Zealand universities continued to evolve their now mature academic quality assurance processes throughout the period of Cycle 4 audits (2008 – 2012). Continuing progress confirmed in Cycle 3, and responding to recommendations of audit panels, universities were commended on their approach to quality assurance in a range of areas including information technology, student support services and campus life. A high-level of commitment to the advancement of Pacific students and staff emerged during Cycle 4 audits. Policies and practices for the advancement of Māori students and staff were variable, but highly commended in a number of instances while continuing to be a focus of efforts for all institutions.

Overall, AQA audit recurrent themes of student feedback, staff development, staff workload and the consistency of postgraduate supervision continued to feature in Cycle 4 audit report recommendations. Joining these, mode of delivery was a major theme for Cycle 4 audits, with several universities receiving recommendations regarding the use of technology in courses, including ensuring that staff had access to adequate support and training.

While the proportion of audit findings related to management and governance has increased in each audit cycle, this analysis suggests that this is a trend that is likely to abate with the introduction of a tightly-focused Cycle 5 framework. A focus on integrated institutional quality assurance systems emerged during Cycle 4 and, again, reflects a maturity in universities' quality assurance processes, policies and practices. The emphasis on bringing existing and effective elements together into a coherent and efficient system reflects the next stage in QA for many institutions.

Within a coherent system, and consistent with international experience, increased focus is now required on some of the 'back end' elements of the QA cycle. While planning and implementing are embedded across the sector, it is the subsequent stages of evaluating, improving and (again) feedback that require additional attention.

Cycle 5 will see a renewed focus on the quality assurance of what has been determined to be key components of a high-quality, research-led, university teaching and learning environment. A look at Cycle 4 findings through a lens of the new Cycle 5 framework reveals that universities might expect changes in the areas of audit panel commendations and recommendations they receive. Analysis suggest than an increased emphasis on student profile and student engagement is likely, while curriculum and assessment and the supervision of postgraduate research students are likely to continue to be a focus for audit panel scrutiny.

A new framework of guideline statements for Cycle 5 can be seen to be reflective of shifts occurring internationally to build on strong progress made to date within universities and of the evolution of external quality assurance practices accordingly.



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