

The Quality of Transnational Education: A Provider View
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for
INQAAHE Workshop, May 2006

Background

AUQA was created in 2000 by the state and federal governments in Australia to carry out quality audits of all the Australian universities (and some other institutions and organisations).

Australia has been a very energetic exporter of higher education.

Therefore, AUQA determined that in auditing a university's academic activities, the audit scope would be 'all academic activities carried out in the university's name, wherever and through whomever those activities occurred'.

This meant that AUQA concerned itself with overseas activities, and operations through partners (both at home and abroad).

Quality audits, like accreditation and assessments, include site visits. However, as institutions proliferate campuses and other operations, the number of 'sites' increases beyond what it is reasonable for an external review panel to visit.

AUQA found that this applies to universities domestic campuses and partners, and even more to the overseas ones.

Therefore, AUQA adopted a risk assessment approach, to determine the nature of a university's overseas operations and whether the AUQA audit panel should visit, and if so which operations it should visit.

Tests for Visiting

There are seven factors that can be considered in determining whether an Audit Visit to an institution's overseas activities is required. The factors are as follows:

(i) **Materiality**

What are the numbers of staff and students per overseas venue (perhaps as a ratio to total student numbers)? If the numbers are relatively modest and stable, then the audit panel may choose to put its efforts elsewhere. If, on the other hand, the numbers are big and/or variable enough to have a discernible impact on the financial position of the institution, then the audit panel may consider this sufficiently material to warrant particular attention.

(ii) Strategic Significance

What is the relationship of the overseas activities to the organisational strategies? For example, if it is ad hoc or not scheduled for growth in comparison with other organisational goals then the audit panel may conclude that it is not sufficiently significant to apply limited resources (time and money) in auditing it. On the other hand, if the overseas activities are the subject of an aggressive growth strategy then the audit panel may deem them sufficiently significant to warrant particular attention, even if the activity is currently quite small.

(iii) Risk Management

What is the likelihood and consequences of things going wrong with the overseas activities? In considering this matter, a major factor is the integrity of the institution's risk management system. Other factors to consider include, for example, how long established the activity is; how stable its operation has been, and whether there are any particular external (e.g. political/media) sensitivities attached to it.

(iv) Risk to Students

The 'Risk' factor outlined above refers to the institution's risk management systems. Risk is also relevant from the point of view of the students. The institution may have thorough systems for large bodies of overseas students, but not for the smaller operations. Put another way, an institution with a large number of overseas students (which might therefore feature highly on 'Materiality') may be highly experienced and have correspondingly secure systems; whereas an institution with only a few overseas students may lack experience in the provision necessary for them, and hence pose a greater risk to students.

(v) Host Country Accreditation

Most overseas locations in which Australian institutions operate have external quality mechanisms of their own. In some case they apply to all incoming education provision while in others they are very restricted in scope. What is the effect of these arrangements on the Australian overseas activities? Do they add to the security of quality of provision? To what extent can their outcomes be used to provide some of the information required for AUQA audit?

(vi) Practicality

What is the number and location of overseas venues, and can a visit be completed in the time available? If the overseas activities are widely dispersed around the world, then there may be practical limitations of time and cost. In such an event, only some, one or even none (depending on the outcomes of the other factors) may be visited. Sampling is a technique used for auditing domestic activities and is no less applicable to overseas activities.

(vii) Necessity

Are there other, more cost-effective means available by which the AUQA panel can acquire the necessary knowledge? Means of collecting information include the Performance Portfolio itself, supporting documentation, browsing the website and talking with people.

This information collection and triangulation can be facilitated through use of printed media, tele-conferencing, video-conferencing, email, face-to-face interviewing and site visiting.

Each has its own advantages and disadvantages, and choice of their usage will depend as much on an assessment of their pros and cons against the issues selected for exploration, as it will on their availability in any given situation.

Ultimately, the decision to undertake an Audit Visit to overseas activities (having been warranted by the other factors) will depend upon whether the information provided via all these other available means is adequate in itself.

Other Quality Agencies

Whenever an AUQA audit panel visits an operation overseas, as a courtesy it advises the quality agency in the overseas country in advance. This provides an opportunity for the agency to supply information on the quality assurance regime to which the Australian institution and/or its overseas partner(s) is subject.

During 2004, it began to seem that this 'courtesy advice' is inadequate, for three reasons.

Firstly, although AUQA's commitment to overseas auditing was born of taking full responsibility for the actions of Australian institutions, AUQA could perhaps be seen as adding QA colonisation to educational colonisation.

Secondly, the overseas audit visits are so tightly scheduled that there is rarely time for interaction with the overseas quality agency.

Thirdly, in auditing joint operations, AUQA has authority only over the Australian institution, not the foreign partner. An active collaboration with the overseas quality agency might permit a more thorough audit of the joint operation.

Bilateral Relations

Since then, AUQA has been actively developing its relations with quality agencies in countries in which Australia has a significant higher education presence. AUQA staff have each taken prime responsibility for one or two countries, and aim to visit that country at least once each year, separate from visits related to audits.

It is hoped that increased time spent by AUQA staff in focused discussions with QA agencies in other countries, country by country, will have the following benefits in relation to each other country:

- increasing the mutual understanding between AUQA and the quality agencies in the country
- increasing awareness of the existence and extent of the Australian higher education quality assurance system, and Australia's commitment to maintaining and enhancing the quality of its transnational education

- ensuring an understanding of AUQA's strong and effective quality audit system and its role in relation to TNE, through investigations in Australia and overseas
- understanding the other country's approach to ensuring quality in higher education to ensure an appropriate approach to auditing an Australian institution's operations in that country
- ensuring that AUQA fully understands which quality issues are of greatest importance to each country with which we work and the context of the quality assurance system in place
- sharing within Australia the information we learn
- developing a joint, bilateral approach to the monitoring, ensuring and enhancing the quality of Australian educational activities in the other country
- more generally, developing a joint, bilateral approach to the support of the higher educational activities in the other country
- where appropriate, agreeing to recognise each other's decisions and judgements in relation to quality of higher education operations.

Memoranda of Co-operation

AUQA has now signed several memoranda of co-operation (MoC) with other agencies. In each case the general purpose is for further mutual understanding and trust, but each also has one or more specific purposes.

Higher Education Quality Council, South Africa: - joint audits of Australian institutions operating in South Africa

New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit: - contribution of New Zealand good practices to AUQA's Good Practice Database (GPDB)

Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation: - sharing information about Australian institutions operating in Hong Kong

National Assessment & Accreditation Council, India: - contribution of Indian good practices to AUQA's GPDB; and working towards mutual recognition of each other's audit decisions

Discussions are underway with the Malaysian Qualifications Authority on an MoC that would emphasise joint audits of Australian campuses in Malaysia; and with the Shanghai Education Evaluation Institute on combining audits of Australian operations with Shanghai partners with SEEI reviews of the partner operations.

UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education

Most of AUQA's activities were in progress before these Guidelines were adopted last year, so it is very pleasing to see the extent to which AUQA is in line with them. The Guidelines for QA and accreditation bodies are as follows:

- a) Ensure that the arrangements include cross-border education in its various modes
AUQA's specification from its inception that our audits would cover 'all academic activities carried out in the university's name, wherever and through whomever those activities occurred', addresses this Guideline, and some of the above shows how we are giving effect to it.

- b) Sustain and strengthen the existing regional and international networks or establish regional networks.

I was a founder of both INQAAHE (1991) and APQN (2003), WAS president of INQAAHE and am Secretary/Treasurer of APQN. One of AUQA's staff is a Board member of INQAAHE, and two (besides me) are Board members of APQN.

- c) Establish links ... between the bodies of the sending country and receiving country.

AUQA is very active in this area ('Bilateral Relations', above)

- d) Provide accurate and accessible information on standards, QA, funding, and the results of the assessment.

Reports of AUQA's audit are in full on the website. This addresses the last point, and the reports also contain information on some of the earlier points. Other matters (such as funding) are more the responsibility of governments.

- e) Good Practice in TNE.

Provision of education is the responsibility of educational institutions, not QA agencies. Hence the UNESCO/CoE Code of Good Practice in the Provision of TNE is more applicable to the institutions than the agencies. However, AUQA does check most of the 11 Principles when it audits an Australian institution, including information provision, admission criteria, assessment, standards, staff proficiency and control of agents.

AUQA has just had an independent external review in which we asked the review panel to report on the extent to which AUQA adheres to the INQAAHE Principles of Good Practice. We believe that the result will be positive.

- f) Reach mutual recognition agreements.

AUQA high level of meaningful activity in this area is described above.

- g) International panels, benchmarking, and joint projects.

AUQA has a foreign member of all its panels. Many AUQA audits are observed by colleagues from other countries. AUQA staff are involved in reviews of institutions and agencies in other countries. We have two specific benchmarking projects in preparation for later this year (with Germany and the UK) and plans for a three-way discussion (with the UK and USA) on auditing and accrediting of transnational education.

Summary

AUQA is committed to the quality of higher education. Our specific remit gives us responsibility for a large slice of Australian higher education. We exercise this with a feeling of accountability, not only to Australian institutions and governments, but also to the students and to the countries from which they come. I have this year written a paper for the Global University Network for Innovation that argues that, provided there is goodwill and collaboration, and the right structures are in place, TNE is of benefit to both the exporting and importing countries – but I must leave it to Peter Cheung to take up the latter point.

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April 2006