

Theme: Professionalization of Quality Assurance

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Professionalization of Quality Assurance in Australia's Non-Self Accrediting Higher Education Providers

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Abstract

Australia has had a well-established quality audit system for universities since the establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in 2000. The inclusion of the non-self-accrediting (non-university) higher education providers (NSA-HEPs) in these national auditing activities since 2006 has brought about considerable professionalization of Quality Assurance (QA) in that sector. Three aspects of this professionalization are evident. The first is the inclusion of these institutions in the national audit schedule, bringing a consistent and co-ordinated approach to audit, and ready public availability of audit results and themes. The second is the improved professional development of managers from the NSA-HEPs through workshops, guidelines and audit training and participation. While these two aspects have been predominantly driven from AUQA, the third response is from the sector itself to undertake its own improvement, through a key benchmarking study initiated by one of the sector organizations.

It is clearly evident that the professionalization of the NSA-HEP sector has not only resulted from the professionalism of AUQA but has itself further stimulated the professionalization of the agency, as demonstrated by the appointment of specialist staff. It is anticipated that this professionalization of quality assurance will spread further from higher education to other sectors of post-secondary education. The imminent formation of a new agency, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), will further develop an integrated and professionalized approach to quality assurance across all of Australian tertiary education, including the vocational sector.

Context and Introduction

Professionalization is generally referred to as a social process whereby people come to engage in an activity as a paid occupation; in the context of quality assurance, it may involve the creation of new paid occupations such as quality managers or quality auditors. Professionalization inevitably involves other aspects associated with the creation of new occupations, including the generation of shared knowledge and validation and accreditation processes for the members of that profession. This professionalization of quality assurance is seen generally in the development of quality agencies, their organization into international bodies such as INQAAHE, the explosion of knowledge in relation to QA and the interest in accreditation of practitioners through specialist Graduate Diplomas.

The professionalization of QA in the Australian non-university or NSA sector of higher education is occurring in the context of significant growth, increasing competition and diversity in higher education nationally. As the sector grows and diversifies, there is also a mainstreaming of QA, an increasing coordination between State and national bodies and a more explicit concern with outcomes and standards. Although this professionalization of the Australian NSA sector has not reached the point of specialist qualifications, there are a number of indicators of increasing professionalization and improving outcomes.

This paper will examine the professionalization of QA in the non-university sector of Australian higher education. It is argued that this professionalization is shown in three principal ways; the coordination of regular audits by AUQA and a subsequent rapid growth in accessible knowledge of its strengths and weakness; the increased professional development of managers from the NSA-HEPs, and the response by the sector to undertake its own improvement, both within individual institutions and in benchmarking. Within the NSA sector, numerous institutions are designating roles such as quality manager in order to meet the demands of compliance and quality improvement. Furthermore, it is argued that there has been powerful synergy between the professionalization of the NSA sector and that of AUQA itself, with increasingly specialised roles within AUQA. It is anticipated that this professionalization will spread further across the tertiary sector to include vocational education with the anticipated formation of the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) to come into full operation by 2013.

National Coordination

The Australian higher education sector has been a leader in quality assurance since the establishment of AUQA in 2000 by the Ministerial Council on Education, Training and Youth Affairs, whose members are the Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers for higher education. AUQA is independent of the higher education sector and of government and has been seen as a model for other countries to follow. Its external review in 2006 commented that 'the higher education sector's general perception of AUQA staff was that they were highly efficient and professional' (AUQA, 2006). Arguably, the first cycle of audits of Australian universities resulted in significant professionalization of quality assurance within Australian universities between 2000 and 2006, but the focus of this paper is on the recent incorporation of the NSA-HEPs into this

national approach. The increasing professionalization of QA has now extended from AUQA itself and the Universities to these other smaller and more diverse Higher Education Providers.

AUQA undertook its first quality audit of a NSA-HEP in 2006. At present, AUQA's responsibility for quality audit of HEPs is separate from the processes of institutional registration and re-registration and program accreditation, which currently still rest with the State Governments. These processes have usually been undertaken by small and under-resourced units within large State Government Education Departments, the major focus of which is on other sectors of education, principally schooling, and vocational, technical and further education, and which may also carry responsibility for related sectors such as science, technology or employment. The AUQA audits of NSA-HEPs have found numerous deficiencies (Winchester, 2010) which suggest that these State processes have been inadequate in ensuring the establishment and effective implementation of quality systems.

Various changes in government regulations and funding resulted in a requirement for those NSA-HEPs in receipt of Commonwealth funding to be subject to a five-yearly audit cycle. In 2007, the then Commonwealth Minister of Education specified that those audits would be undertaken by AUQA. With the growth of the private sector, AUQA is now faced with the major task of auditing over 80 NSA-HEPs by 2015 (compared to completion of the second cycle of University audits which involves the audits of 18 universities in 2011 and 2012). Although the audits of NSA-HEPs are generally shorter and the institutions smaller than universities, this poses a significant workload which has necessitated AUQA employing more staff in more specialized roles.

This incorporation of the NSA-HEPs with the Universities into a national audit schedule ensures a professional and consistent approach to auditing and is an important step in the evolution of AUQA into a Quality and Standards Authority for the whole of tertiary education which will by 2013 bring together the State controls and regulation of vocational technical and further education outlined above with the current AUQA scope of activities.

Professionalization of QA in the NSA sector: the role of AUQA

The professionalization of QA of the NSA sector is demonstrated by AUQA itself, which commissioned two reviews of the main themes evident in the first ten and then the first twenty audit reports (Winchester, 2009; 2010). The acceleration of the audit program has resulted in the rapid accumulation of a body of knowledge in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of the NSA-HEPs as a sector. The NSA-HEPs are a diverse set of institutions with relatively small higher education enrolments compared to universities (rarely larger than 2000 and often much smaller, whereas the largest Australian University has over 40,000 enrolments). The NSA-HEPs include theological colleges, single or multi-discipline colleges (e.g. focussed on tourism, business and IT, or design), large Colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFEs) which may have just a handful of higher education programs, and University pathway providers. They are also very varied in their organisational and governance arrangements, some being not-for-profit while others are part of major international enterprises.

The review of major themes from the first twenty audit reports identified aspects of good practice but also significant areas for improvement (Winchester, 2010). There were numerous commendations for aspects of teaching and learning, community engagement, the overall student experience and student support. The five main areas identified for improvement were: institutional or corporate governance, academic governance, human resource management, benchmarking, and assessment and moderation. In general, the 'second ten' audit reports were more critical than the 'first ten', particularly in the area of institutional governance. They also contained more severe recommendations for action, including re-audit within one or two years for several institutions.

Professionalization of QA in the NSA sector: professional development

The HEPs have themselves professionalised their approach to quality assurance. In many cases, this has been an immediate response to the requirements for audit preparation. A number of the larger institutions have appointed quality managers, while those institutions with lesser capacity have allocated responsibility for quality matters to existing staff members. At a systems level, however, the accessibility of the knowledge from the first twenty audits has been a starting point for significant professional development within the NSA sector, much of which has been co-ordinated by AUQA. The professional development has included workshops to help institutions to prepare for audit in relation to the Quality Audit Factors (the standards against which the NSA-HEPs are audited), as well as more specialised workshops on governance and use of data in 2010 and on benchmarking in 2011. The workshops have been well attended, with an average attendance of 44 people per workshop¹, including by CEOs and other senior personnel. Additionally from 2010, AUQA's annual conference has been subtly renamed from the Australian Universities Quality Forum (AUQF) to the Australian Quality Forum (AuQF), thereby clearly opening it up to the non-University sector. A significant number of attendees from the NSA sector enjoyed and contributed to the 2010 AuQF conference (46 of 229 attendees, almost exactly 20%)¹ and commented positively on the welcome they had received.

In response to one of the needs for improvement identified in the first twenty audit reports, AUQA, in broad consultation with the sector, has also produced an Occasional Publication to provide guidance in the area of academic governance. The publication focuses on the relation between institutional and academic governance, the role of the Academic Board and aspects of academic governance including strategic planning, academic policies, use of performance data, benchmarking and academic standards (AUQA, 2010). There was significant consultation with the sector and interested parties, which included an online questionnaire to which approximately 40 people responded in an overwhelmingly helpful fashion. One significant finding from this questionnaire was that the NSA-HEPs did not want to be compared to universities, and this preference is reflected in the latest version of the guidelines (AUQA, 2010) where the good practice examples quoted are exclusively from the NSA sector.

Two further spinoffs have arisen from the inclusion of the NSA-HEPs in the national audit scheme. A significant benefit arising from the analysis of the first twenty audit reports has been the training of more auditors from the NSA sector such that each NSA-HEP audit panel has at least one representative from the University sector and one from the NSA-HEPs. These trained and experienced auditors are ambassadors for quality management into the sector. In early 2011, of 144

auditors on the AUQA register, while the majority were from university backgrounds, a total of 14 came from a NSA-HEP background¹, while eight were AUQA staff members. Additionally, as more NSA-HEPs are audited, a further impetus to the sharing of good practice is the publication of Good Practices from the NSA sector on the AUQA Good Practice Database, publicly available at: <http://www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/index.php>

Professionalization of QA in the NSA sector: benchmarking by the sector

A third and very positive indicator of professionalization within the NSA-HEPs has been the work initiated by the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) and encouraged by AUQA in benchmarking. The audit reports of the first twenty audits of the NSA-HEPs showed that benchmarking was an area which was in need of improvement across the sector (Winchester, 2010). The ACPET benchmarking project shows the beginnings of an effective response to that sectoral knowledge. The first tranche of the benchmarking occurred in mid-2010 between just 19 members of ACPET in a process which was independently managed through ACPET and Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu. The project developed a second iteration December 2010 – January 2011, including additional information relating to scholarly activity and community engagement and with 20 participating members, about half of whom were new and half previous participants. Community engagement was an area of strength noted in many of the first twenty audit reports and the benchmarking process will assist those institutions to develop an evidence base and to build on these strengths.

While the initial scope of the benchmarking project was limited, it has brought about demonstrable improvement in participating institutions and has raised awareness in others. <http://www.acpet.edu.au/industry-advocacy/higher-education-benchmarking>. The full details of the indicators collected relate to a number of benchmark areas including students, staff, academic governance and policy, as well as surveys; these metrics are available on the ACPET website: http://www.acpet.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Policy_Matters/ACPET%20Higher%20Education%20Benchmarking%20Dec%202010.pdf. ACPET is one of the partners with AUQA in the provision of benchmarking workshops in 2011.

Synergies in professionalization

This paper has been particularly focussed on the developing professionalization of the NSA sector within Australian higher education. Interestingly this professionalization shows some synergistic elements with further increasing professionalization of AUQA, Australia's own highly professional quality assurance agency. The agency's requirements for quality audit have not only brought a new wave of trained professionals into the sector, but an additional influx of staff into the agency. These staff include audit directors focussed on audit of NSA-HEPs and also an operations manager for the sector. In 2010, a post-audit coordinator position was established to manage the follow-up reporting requirements which AUQA now manages on behalf of the Federal government.

Summary and Conclusion

The inclusion of the NSA sector in AUQA's auditing activities has brought about considerable professionalization of QA in that sector, particularly to address weaknesses in governance. Professionalization is shown in at least three dimensions: auditing and the growth of a common body of knowledge, including good practices, from the audit reports; professional development of NSA staff with designated responsibilities or positions both within institutions and as quality auditors; and benchmarking within the sector. This professionalization has mainly been driven by AUQA but is just beginning to be self-directed as knowledge and understanding of QA becomes more widely diffused. In turn, the professionalization of the NSA institutions has further stimulated professionalization, particularly as shown by role specialization, within the already professional body of AUQA.

Professionalization is a positive term for the development of new occupational specializations, with the accompanying growth of a body of knowledge, conferences, and accreditation and credentialing processes. A more negative view would be to consider this process as incremental credentialism. However, what is important is whether these processes of occupational specialization, knowledge acquisition and dissemination, professional development and benchmarking are driving improvement. The evidence from the University sector in Australia showed huge improvements in process and also in outcomes from the first cycle of audits (pre-2006) to the second (scheduled for completion in 2012). The effectiveness of the inclusion of the NSA sector in the national audit schedule will not really be evident until the second cycle of NSA audits commencing in 2015. However the indicators, particularly in the sharing and benchmarking of good practice, are all healthy. While there is much work still to be done, the activities which are associated with and give rise to professionalization, will continue to enhance the reputation of Australia's entire higher education sector, its universities, NSA-HEPs and AUQA itself as it transitions into TEQSA.

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Note

1 Data provided by AUQA.