

Institutional academic audit: The experiences of New Zealand's newest university



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***Abstract:** On the 1 January 2000, the Auckland Institute of Technology (AIT) became the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), the eighth university in New Zealand. With the change of status from a polytechnic to a university, AUT is now required to undergo biennial institutional academic audit by the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (AAU). This paper documents AUT's experience of its first institutional academic audit by the AAU, from the initial planning to the public release of the Academic Audit Report. It examines the approach used to "sell" the idea to stakeholders, including staff, and considers what improvements can be made as AUT goes into its next academic audit cycle.*

***Keywords:** academic audit, New Zealand universities, Auckland University of Technology*

Introduction

The Auckland University of Technology (AUT) is the eighth and newest university in New Zealand, having acquired university status on 1 January 2000. It now falls under the auspices of the New Zealand Universities Vice-Chancellors' Committee (NZVCC). The NZVCC was set up as a statutory body in accordance with the Education Amendment Act (1990) and given explicit responsibility for standards and qualifications in the university sector. As a result of government pressure for greater accountability on academic quality in the university system, the AAU was established by the NZVCC as an independent body. All the New Zealand universities accept the value of scrutiny of their academic processes and acknowledge the value of examining practice within a quality assurance framework.

AAU audit panels take as their starting point each university's own planned goals and objectives in relation to the AAU's twelve audit factors (Woodhouse 1995). Moreover, in addition to the university's specific objectives, they also consider the five nationally required characteristics of a university, as set out in New Zealand legislation (NZ Government 1990). The AAU audit panel will then consider whether the university's policies and processes are suitable to achieve the planned objectives; whether what actually happens conforms with the university's policies and processes and achieves its stated objectives; and whether the university uses the information gleaned to revisit and improve its goals and objectives as well as its policies and processes.

The audit process first requires the university to undertake a self-review in accordance with the above considerations. This self-examination is compiled into a Quality Portfolio (QP) that is submitted to the AAU Panel three months before its scheduled audit visit. The visit then

revolves around verification, clarification and further exploration of the issues in the QP. The Panel typically comprises five persons drawn from other universities in New Zealand and Australia as well as Maori and industry representatives with knowledge and experience of quality systems and the education sector. A few weeks before their visit the Panel advises the university whom they wish to meet during their visit and also what additional materials they require. Typically this includes a range of staff and students, university council members, external interested parties, as well as members of committees and working groups.

The Panel's findings are made public in an audit report. Prior to its release, the university is provided with a draft to scrutinise for errors of fact or misinterpretation.

The challenge for AUT

Initially there was some reluctance by AUT staff to accept that external AAU audit was necessary and should indeed be welcomed as a cost effective way of providing an independent quality check and assurance for the public at large that New Zealand's newest university is sound. Some senior academics were openly hostile to the notion and managed to influence other staff within their faculties. This antagonism arose mainly from the fact that as a polytechnic, AIT had been subjected to ongoing accreditation visits from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and the New Zealand Polytechnics Programme Committee for the approval of each new programme.

Moreover, in terms of AIT's rigorous Quality Management System, internal audit and review were part of its life as a polytechnic. The strong belief that AUT has already been 'audited to death' was further strengthened by the fact that between 1995 and 1999, a large quantity of documents were accumulated to produce the evidence required to prove that AIT met the five statutory criteria of universities in New Zealand.

The Start

The first step in the process was to find a way to communicate to staff that it was mandatory for AUT to participate in the AAU's academic audit cycle. Once agreement with the AAU Director was reached that AUT's first audit would take the form of a comprehensive, whole-of-institution focus, AUT's Vice-Chancellor, according to established protocol, followed up with a formal invitation to the AAU.

A paper, *AUT and Academic Audit 2000-2001* (hereafter called "the Plan"), was then drafted for circulation and discussion within the faculties. This turned out to be a protracted process. One of the areas of contention was that the Plan proposed setting up an Academic Audit Committee directly under Academic Board. This was not favoured on the grounds that AUT already had too many committees. When the suggestion was made for the AUT Academic Audit Committee (AAC) to be established as a sub-committee of the Academic Standards Committee (which itself reported directly to Academic Board), this was accepted. The Plan was amended accordingly, and presented to Academic Board for debate and eventual adoption.

Implementing the Plan

The first step in implementing the Plan was to set up the AAC with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) as the chair. The rest of the membership comprised all the deans, deputy vice-chancellors and directors.

The AAC was established with the following terms of reference: to make policy decisions as related to academic audit (for example the approval of the AAU Panel and the approval of the AAU Panel visit dates); to champion academic audit at a high level in the faculties and directorates; to authorise and empower the Academic Audit Coordinating Group (AACG) to act with their authority for the self-review and the production of the QP; to authorise the publication of the QP; to resolve issues of conflict as required; to maintain general oversight of the AACG; and to undertake a review of the academic audit process and academic audit report.

The next step was to amend the terms of reference of the Academic Standards Committee to take in its new function with the AAC as one of its sub committees. The Plan made it clear that *AUT's Statement of Objectives 2000 – 2002*, with its fourteen key strategic objectives would be the starting point of the process of academic audit conducted by the AAU. It also explained that academic audit would be a composite process that would be owned and undertaken by both the AAU and AUT. It involved a comprehensive review of AUT's systems, processes and procedures. The academic audit incorporated two aspects: an internal self-review where AUT would be required to prepare a QP and an external academic audit when a team of auditors (the Panel) would visit AUT three months after the QP was received.

AUT would need to explain how it evaluated its effectiveness in meeting all of its objectives and how it reported on and used its findings. AUT was also expected to explain the mechanisms it had in place for self-improvement. Ultimately AUT would be judged on whether its quality assurance processes were adequate to enable it to achieve its mission, goals and key strategic objectives.

Obtaining staff “buy in”

Crucial to the task of preparing for AUT's first institutional academic audit was to obtain “buy in” and involvement from all AUT staff. The first step in this process was the setting up of the AACG from the faculties and administrative divisions within AUT. The members of the AAC were all requested to nominate one representative from their faculty / directorate / division to represent them on the AACG. It was emphasised that the nominated representatives would need to be people with deep insight into the workings of their faculty / directorate, so that they could identify pertinent sources of information.

The AACG was tasked with the following functions: to promote academic audit in the faculties / directorates / divisions; to disseminate information on academic audit; to collect and review information for the self-review ; to prepare the QP; to respond to the Panel requests for further information; to facilitate the Panel visit; and to scrutinise the draft Report for errors. Crucial to the process was the need to meet the agreed upon timelines.

The intention was that the AACG would undertake the activities required for the production of the QP and the actual promotion of academic audit. Matters of policy would be deferred to the AAC. It was acknowledged that a process of advertising AUT's academic audit would be necessary in order to make staff aware of the process and its implications. It was also envisaged that members of the AAC and AACG would act as "champions" for academic audit and would disseminate information in their specific areas. This was more difficult to achieve than was at first anticipated. Ultimately the QP preparation involved many other AUT members as necessary information was sought and checked. Part of the task of the AACG and other key players was to ensure that information already available from previous academic audits, reviews, data banks and other sources was assembled by the AACG representative.

Budgetary Matters

A central budget was established to accommodate administrative costs, including the AAU charges (\$32,000), the printing and publishing of the Quality Portfolio (\$21,000) and the time allocation for the AACG Secretary (0.3 FTE over 18 months).

At the time when the Plan was adopted by Academic Board in July 2000, approval was given to the plan which set out the requirements for the time allocation for faculty / directorate / division representatives on the AACG. This provided for one complete day per week (0.2 FTE) during the time the self-review was underway (August - December 2000), five full days to check the QP drafts for consistency and errors, and a further three full days for the AAU Panel visit. The rationale for this was that in order for the AACG members to efficiently fulfil their role as the coordinator for their faculty / directorate / division, it was necessary to make their work an integral part of their job and not “on top of” their job.

Although the Plan, which set out a budget of approximate costings, was adopted at Academic Board with no alterations, anecdotal evidence suggests that there were variations in the manner in which the work of the AACG members was recognised. For example, while some faculties / directorates / divisions did provide for the identified time allocation, several of the AACG representatives fulfilled their role on top of their other roles and responsibilities. Indications are that this compromised the AACG representative’s ability to fully carry out the AACG functions.

Conducting the internal self-review

The self-review was intended to provide a valuable opportunity to document and reflect on practices within AUT. It was also intended to be used to integrate information and conclusions derived from professional body accreditation activities, faculty reviews and boards of studies meetings. Moreover, it was to indicate how procedures were related to AUT’s strategic objectives, and whether these procedures were successful.

It was emphasised that the process was not to be a mere a document-collecting exercise. Its purpose was to focus on improvement rather than mere description. In other words, the main question to be answered was “how can AUT be improved?” As all measurement data collection and evaluations of quality systems were focused on improvement, the decision was taken early in the process to include at the end of each chapter, a section on *Action Plans for Improvement*. Individuals were also identified to take responsibility for initiating and implementing the identified action. The fundamental information for the self-review was gathered by the AACG by means of templates with pertinent trigger questions to each of the AAU’s areas of critical focus (as appropriate):

- What are we doing?
- Why are we doing it?
- What are we doing especially well?
- How are we doing this (ie what systems are we using)?
- What documentation associated with the system do we have?
- What evidence do we have to prove the effectiveness of these systems?
- What areas have we identified for improvement?

Table 1, which represented the scope of AUT’s comprehensive academic audit, formed the template for the reports that were drafted as part of the self-review process. For each of the ticked areas, the faculty / division / directorate was required to address the questions listed above. These reports were then summarised into the QP.

Table 1 Summary of Areas of Critical Focus

	Programmes & Modules	Teaching, Learning & Assessment	Research & Link with Teaching	Staff Matters
Feedback	✓	✓	✓	✓
Treaty of Waitangi Obligations	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reviews	✓	✓		
Joint, Franchised & External Programmes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Student Support		✓	✓	
Facilities & Resources	✓	✓	✓	✓

The Approach used

The Invitational Model (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996) was used for managing AUT's academic audit. Accordingly the internal self-review process was intentionally designed to facilitate the maximum cooperation, collaboration and "buy in" from all AUT faculty and staff. Integral to this process was the acceptance of AUT's audit obligations and the embracing of the audit Plan by the AUT Vice-Chancellor, the Deputy Vice-Chancellors and the Deans. What occurred at AUT confirms what Corneslay (1992) observed: that only when the top management seriously adopts the audit Plan and a "quality" philosophy will it be accepted by the faculty, staff and students.

Invitational processes for the internal self-review were also set out in the Plan. The idea behind the concept of the AACG was that staff within the faculties / divisions / directorates would perceive as less threatening, colleagues who were not "outsiders".

Vinten (1994) cautions that the behavioural style adopted by auditors is crucial in establishing effective relationships. An auditor who approaches the task in a cooperative, collaborative and participatory manner will project the best approach for achieving the best audit outcomes. Essentially Vinten was talking about an Invitational Approach, although he doesn't actually use the term.

In accordance with the Invitational Model, the place where the Panel was to meet with interviewees was a significant consideration. A suite of well-appointed rooms was needed: one big enough for the Audit Panel to conduct their continuous flow of interviews over the three-day period; another room (the briefing room), close to the Panel's interview room; a room to accommodate up to 40 people over working lunches and finally, the all-important proximity to toilets. The School of Hospitality provided the ideal venue.

Writing the Quality Portfolio

After a thorough internal process during which it went through numerous drafts, the self-review resulted in the final QP. AUT's Quality Portfolio covered all core information as set out in the Audit Manual Handbook for Institutions and Members of Audit Panels (Woodhouse, 1995).

In addition, the following additional materials were supplied in a separate Appendix to the QP: Statement of Objectives, Strategic Plan, Teaching and Learning Development Plan and a document on AUT's Research Quality Processes. A box of documents was also prepared for each Panel member. This included the current Annual Report, the current Research Report and the Postgraduate and Doctoral Studies Handbooks.

A labelled filing cabinet with a range of additional documentation was also prepared for the Panel visit. The QP, Appendices and boxed documents were submitted to the Panel the required three months in advance of the visit.

One month before the Panel visit, an update of the progress made on the identified action plans was submitted.

AAU review of the Quality Portfolio

The Panel scrutinised the QP and presented AUT with a request for additional material together with specific questions which needed to be addressed before their visit.

The AAU Planning visit

A draft programme for the Panel visit was submitted for consideration to AUT. Soon after this the Panel Chair together with the AAU Director and Academic Officer followed up with a planning visit, during which the programme for the three-day visit was finalised. The actual interview schedule was clarified and agreed upon at this planning meeting.

Over the three-day period the AAU Panel planned to interview more than 240 of AUT's various stakeholders, including undergraduate and postgraduate students, academic and general staff, AUT Council and Executive members, industry representatives and staff and student union representatives.

AUT's preparation for the AAU Panel visit

In order to avoid creating a contrived situation and one in which dramaturgical compliance was encouraged, the decision was taken not to conduct a "mock panel visit" for the interviewees. However, in order to prepare the interviewees for the visit, two briefing meetings were held, one on each of the Wellesley and Akoranga Campuses. Their aim was to provide interviewees with the opportunity to discuss the forthcoming visit and to give them permission to be open and frank with the Panel. For the Wellesley meeting, a former chair of an AAU Panel accepted the invitation to address the group and to answer any questions the interviewees might have.

The AAU Panel visit

In order to determine whether the self-review and QP was a fair representation of AUT, the Panel interviewed staff, students and other stakeholders from all areas of AUT. In the process, they validated some of the conclusions of AUT's self-review, revised some of the conclusions of AUT's self-review, increased the credibility of AUT's self-review, judged AUT's teaching and research according to agreed national and international standards and contributed towards AUT's self-learning and improvement processes.

During the three days of the Panel visit, the interviewees were requested to assemble ten minutes prior to the scheduled start of their session, and then again to return to the briefing room afterwards. Any comments they had about their particular session were written on a

whiteboard, which was then shared with later groups. This reportedly had the effect of making the interviewees feel more prepared and in control of the situation when they were later ushered in for their session with the Panel. Finally they were asked to complete a brief, anonymous questionnaire about how they experienced the academic audit process.

Results of the survey of participants in AUT's first Academic Audit

Of the 241 people interviewed, 194 returned completed the voluntary questionnaire, a response rate of 80%.

In general, feedback gained from the questionnaire was positive. Awareness of the purpose of the Panel visit was high across all sections of AUT. Contributions to the self-review and the compiling of the QP was mixed, showing a low level of student contribution (22%), with a higher level of contribution by AUT Staff (40%) and Council members (71%). The consultation of the final QP (which had been made available on the AUT intranet website) was high by AUT Staff and Council members (70% each) and low by Industry Representatives (25%) and AUT Students (35%).

The overall impressions of the Panel visit were affirming, with most suggesting it was “positive” and “thorough”. Other comments suggested that the Panel visit was too hurried, with the interviews taking too little time. In terms of overall fairness and relevance of questions, the majority replied in the affirmative, while just under ten percent of respondents expressed dissatisfaction. Participants were also positive about the effect of the academic audit process on AUT as a whole. Almost 70 percent of AUT staff and students responded in an affirming manner, indicating a fairly high level of “buy-in”.

The Academic Audit Report

About ten weeks after the AAU Panel visit, AUT was given the opportunity to scrutinise the draft report and to point out any errors of fact or misinterpretations. This draft report was widely circulated to the AAC and AACG and a variety of suggested amendments were received. The AAC then met to finalise the AUT response. It was however evident from the final publicly released Report that very few suggestions, other than spelling corrections, were accepted.

Towards the middle of November 2000 AUT was sent the finalised report, which was embargoed for ten days before being made public. This provided time to inform the staff and to draft AUT's own press release to coincide with the public release of the Report.

While the AAU distributed the Report to all major newspapers, tertiary institutions and government bodies in New Zealand and to many overseas institutions, it was interesting that the Report attracted very little media attention. The Education Review was the only newspaper to mention it, which it did on two occasions, both of which were affirming for AUT.

Follow up to the Academic Audit Report

Within a month of the Report's release, the AAC met in order to discuss the 17 recommendations in the Report. A consequence of this meeting was that a two-tier matrix was drafted: the first tier focused on the AAU Panel recommendations, and identified individuals who would be responsible for initiating and implementing each specific recommendation. A

second tier comprised those areas for improvement which were identified in the self-review and which were not part of the AAU Report's recommendations. The Academic Standards Committee is monitoring the progress made on each of these two tiers of recommendations. Furthermore, AUT will of necessity need to report in its next academic audit on the steps it has taken to address the 17 recommendations identified in the Report.

Recommendations for the next academic audit

From the outset, AUT recognised that ownership by AUT's stakeholders of the academic audit process was crucial if the results and implications of the academic audit were to receive the appropriate consideration and action. This was the rationale behind setting up the AACG with staff who had a dedicated time allocation to their role. While the AAC membership included a student representative who consulted conscientiously with the student community with respect to the various drafts of the QP (after the self-review had taken place), there was no student representative on the AACG itself. It was assumed that when the self-review was underway, students within the various faculties would contribute as part of the consultation process. Evidently this did not occur. The results of the survey of participants indicated that AUT's self-review was not widely understood and owned by the AUT community. Participation in the self-review stage showed a low level of student involvement.

Furthermore, the notion of AACG members being granted a dedicated time allocation for their work was not widely embraced, and this had a serious impact on the quality of the consultation process as well as meeting timelines for the return of completed templates for inclusion in the QP. It also had an impact on the quality of the scrutiny given to each draft of the QP. In preparing for its next academic audit, it will be essential for AUT to address these issues and to ensure that a student representative is included in the AACG. Furthermore, all members of the AACG must be given recognition for their work by means of a mutually agreed time allocation or the equivalent.

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