

Cycle 6 Academic audit of University of Otago – Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka

Executive summary

Academic audits are part of the external quality assurance arrangements for universities in Aotearoa New Zealand. They are the only external quality assurance process that takes a whole-of-institution view of a university's teaching, learning, student support and student outcomes. Audits are undertaken by a panel of peers comprising senior academics or academic managers in Aotearoa New Zealand, a Māori panel member, a Pacific panel member (where possible), an international panel member and a student or recent graduate.

Universities in Aotearoa New Zealand are currently engaged in their sixth cycle of academic audit. Cycle 6 is a composite audit with two main phases. In the first phase, from 2017 – 2020, universities engaged in an enhancement theme focusing on access, outcomes and opportunities for Māori students and for Pacific students. Further information is available on the enhancement themes website.¹

The second phase of Cycle 6 is an audit against a framework of 30 guideline statements (GS) in five sections: (1) Leadership and management of teaching and learning, and academic quality; (2) Student life cycle, support and wellbeing; (3) Curriculum, assessment and delivery; (4) Teaching quality; and (5) Supervision of postgraduate research students. Universities undertake a self-assessment against the audit framework and present a self-review report and portfolio of supporting evidence. The university's self-review should also reflect the university's obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the interdependence of university research and teaching, and universities' role as critic and conscience of society. Its assessment should encompass all students, all delivery and all staff who undertake or support teaching or supervision.

The University of Otago — Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka submitted its self-review portfolio on 28 March 2024. The Panel found the self-review to be comprehensive and to have made good use of data from university surveys. The Panel met twice (online) before undertaking an in-person site visit to the University from 22-24 July 2024. During the site visit, the Panel held 24 interview sessions and met with 82 members of staff and 37 students. Information gained through the interviews supplemented that contained in the self-review portfolio and the Panel drew on both sources to reach its findings.

The Cycle 6 Academic Audit of University of Otago — Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka took place in the context of the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Financial challenges, arising in part from the pandemic, and changes in the senior leadership of the University provided further context for this audit. Despite this challenging context, the University has launched a new ikoa Māori and developed a new and aspirational strategic direction that includes becoming Te Tiriti o Waitangi-led and a university of the Pacific. It is consolidating the renewal of its senior leadership team, including

¹ <https://www.enhanceunz.com/>

the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor and the first Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Māori) for the University. The University intends to appoint a senior Pacific role to lead work to become a university of the Pacific.

The first section of the audit framework is concerned with leadership and management of teaching and learning. It also contains two guideline statements that examine progress on a university's enhancement theme objectives from phase 1 of the audit cycle. The Panel finds the University's strategic documents to be coherent and to provide useful direction. The strategic documents are explicit about changes needed and set out a substantial change programme. A sophisticated approach to change management—utilising multiple models, capabilities and levers—will be required to support the anticipated changes.

The University's aspirations to become Te Tiriti o Waitangi-led and a university of the Pacific have implications for staffing, engagement with student voices, how both the physical campus and digital learning environments are planned, curriculum development and professional development for teachers. The Panel is pleased to see the University's willingness to be open about addressing other challenges, including undertaking work to address racism and promote bicultural competency. The University has made progress on its enhancement theme objectives and remains committed to achieving equity of outcomes for taura Māori, and for Pacific students.

The development of a modern digital learning environment is a key strategic initiative, together with augmented staff capabilities in technology-enhanced learning. Such an environment is needed to undertake teaching and learning in a modern university and to support other initiatives. These other initiatives include timetabling, the ability to track student progress and engagement with support across different services, and assessing the impact of initiatives and interventions dynamically. Data and reporting systems should be developed as part of the digital learning environment.

Section B of the audit framework—Student life cycle, support and wellbeing—is an area of strength for the University. It has an outstanding track record in student academic achievement, an ongoing commitment to supporting successful transitions for students, and comprehensive and culturally appropriate learning support and wellbeing services. Although support systems are well established and effective, they could be strengthened by better data that should be available through the development of the digital learning environment. Analytics should allow earlier identification of students at academic risk, before they trigger academic warning processes. The University intends to review its access programmes, which the Panel considers could better facilitate access for taura Māori and Pacific students. Pathways into postgraduate studies for these students should also be strengthened. Work to improve access to and resolution of academic complaints, appeals and grievances should seek to improve awareness of and trust in these processes for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The third section (C) of the audit framework examines curriculum, assessment and delivery. The University has work underway to simplify papers and programmes, refresh the University Graduate Profile, and review Ngā Kaupapa mō te reo Māori | Māori Language Policy. The Panel endorses this

work. It also recommends that the University consider reintroducing its survey of employers and examine whether its existing review arrangements are sufficiently agile and focused to support the curriculum changes that will arise both from initiatives underway in this area and the broader strategic aspirations to become Te Tiriti o Waitangi-led and a university of the Pacific. Assessment design should also reflect these aspirations and direction from the Māori Strategic Framework, Pacific Strategic Framework and the Disability Action Plan. There are also opportunities to strengthen the cultural safety and inclusiveness of special consideration and alternative arrangements in assessment. Although work to consider the current and future role(s) of Generative Artificial Intelligence is underway, the Panel considers more detailed and consistent guidance would be helpful. Finally, in this section, expectations for external moderation of assessment for both undergraduate and postgraduate level taught papers should be reconsidered.

Section D of the audit framework considers teaching quality and the recruitment, development and recognition of staff. The Panel is pleased to see the ongoing contribution made by the University's Academic Leadership Development Programme and the success achieved by University staff in the national Te Whatu Kairangi Aotearoa Tertiary Educator Awards. The recent establishment of an Educational Network|Kōkiri ki Tua is also a positive development. Further work is needed to increase the numbers of kaimahi Māori at all levels throughout the whole University, and to support their influence, success and wellbeing. Separately, reflecting different but complementary drivers and responsibilities, there is a need to increase the number of skilled Pacific staff at all levels throughout the whole University, and to support their influence, success, and wellbeing. The University has recognised the need for its teaching development activities to be better aligned with strategic direction. Support is needed to embed te ao Māori and Pacific pedagogies in curricula, as is a timeline for the implementation of this support.

The final section (E) of the audit framework focuses on postgraduate research students. Again, the University has a record of strong academic achievement for postgraduate research students and reports high levels of satisfaction with supervision. The already positive experience for postgraduate research students could be strengthened further by specifying and monitoring core training requirements for supervisors and improving transparency of processes and decisions around admission and enrolment, scholarships and other financial support for postgraduate research students. The Panel is pleased to see a recent development that enables oral examinations for Māori PhD students to be held on a marae. There is an opportunity to improve the experience of research Master's students through greater consistency of expectations across the University.

The Cycle 6 Academic Audit Framework also asks universities to reflect on their obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the interdependence of university research and teaching, and universities' role as critic and conscience of society. Its assessment should encompass all students, all delivery and all staff who undertake or support teaching or supervision.

The University aspires to be Te Tiriti o Waitangi-led. This journey is already reflected in strategy, student support, curriculum and staffing, but will require continued engagement. The interdependence of teaching and research is clearly visible in academic activities. The University is

explicit about its role as critic and conscience of society; it has taken steps to support staff contributing to this function and anticipates further work.

With respect to the scope components of the audit framework, the University is clearly aware of and is responsive to the needs of different groups of students, particularly Māori students, Pacific students and disabled students. The University also considers the needs of students on the Christchurch and Wellington campuses and students studying at a distance. The University has a programme of work underway that will assist in paying further attention to the needs of specific groups of staff. Attention to different modes of delivery will become increasingly important for the University in future and, again, it has work underway here.

Based on the evidence available to it at the time of the audit, the Panel considers the University does meet, and in several instances exceeds, the outcomes and standards a university of good international standing would be expected to demonstrate in respect of the guideline statements. This is particularly the case for student achievement and student support. The University therefore meets the expectations of the Cycle 6 Academic Audit Framework. Where it considers further work is required, the Panel has made recommendations or affirmed enhancement initiatives already identified by the University. The Panel has made 13 commendations, 15 affirmations and 19 recommendations that support and encourage good practices and are intended to assist the University as it progresses its own strategic direction.

The University of Otago — Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka should provide a follow-up report one year after the release of this report. The follow-up report should address progress on both affirmations and recommendations. Once it has been accepted by the AQA Board, the follow-up report should be made publicly available.

Further information about academic audits, including previous audit reports, is available on the AQA website.²

² www.aqa.ac.nz