

AQA Quality Forum 2020 – Summary Report

The 2020 AQA Quality Forum was held via zoom on 20 November. This format was in response to budget and time constraints being experienced by professional quality staff in universities. It also reflected uncertainties in national restrictions on travel at the time the Forum was being organised.

The Forum was attended by professional quality staff from seven of the eight universities. This short report serves as a record of the Forum. The Forum was structured around the following topics:

- Wellbeing and engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Hot topic breakout sessions – remote reviews, impact of academic audit
- Maintaining assessment standards and academic integrity
- Re-engaging with academic audit

Aspects of the topics discussed at the Forum are expected to be developed further in university 'Good Practice Assessments' of their responses to continuity and adaption of teaching, learning and student support necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. 'Good Practice Assessments' are to be submitted to AQA by the end of January 2021.

This is a report on issues discussed by a relatively small group of people. While this group do have university-wide perspectives and responsibilities, this report will not reflect the experience of all staff and students in universities in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2020.

Implications for universities and for AQA are summarised at the end of the report.

Wellbeing and engagement

The extraordinary efforts made by staff across universities, recognition of the strengths of many individuals, support from colleagues and the high levels of fatigue and tiredness being experienced were consistent themes in comments about well-being and engagement.

While acknowledging the challenges, factors that were considered to have assisted universities in their responses to the pandemic included:

- early decision-making
- teaching 'pauses' to allow time for the transition to online teaching
- Universities deliberately structuring low contact days
- sick leave not being recorded against allowances
- clear communications
- student pulse surveys enabling targeted responses particularly around IT needs
- student engagement with and contribution to emergency and ongoing response management teams
- grade adjustments (although these were not used by all universities and posed some challenges for universities that did not use them)

- existing policy settings that enabled lecture recordings and remote provision of specialist software.

Some positive aspects were also recognised. These included:

- recognition that big decisions with far-reaching consequences can be made and enacted relatively quickly
- new and more flexible work practices.

It was also recognised that factors such as deficit reduction programmes, restructuring, high-work levels (over-work) would continue to contribute to uncertainty and likely high stress levels. These are in addition to ‘normal’ uncertainties such as new strategic plans and changes in senior management. There are challenges in coping with high work demands and finding time to take leave. Requirements to take leave are contributing to work-pressures.

In some cases, Covid-19 and response activities have had a disruptive effect on constructive engagement with student voice. Most of the discussion was focused on staff, but uncertainties, stress and anxieties for students were also recognised.

There are particular challenges in engaging staff with academic audit self-review processes when staff face higher levels of uncertainty regarding their future roles in universities. There will likely be a loss of institutional memory and experience of academic audit, including among senior management teams. The longer time period between audits may also contribute to loss of institutional knowledge. These matters will need to both be reflected in self-reviews and included in briefings to audit panels. Academic audits have occurred previously both at times of high levels of change (new Vice-Chancellor and senior leadership teams, major restructures) and external shocks (for example, the Canterbury earthquakes). Universities will be able to draw on those experiences, but audit panels will also need to appreciate the particular challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This is part of recognition that 2021 (and probably future years) will also be a difficult year with high levels of uncertainty.

Hot topic 1 – Impact of academic audit

AQA had previously analysed university one-year follow-up reports and wanted to discuss extending this analysis to the inter-cycle reports. There were two reasons for this:

1. To ensure that audit panels were making recommendations that were useful and feasible.
2. To examine how the system as a whole was responding to audit recommendations.

It was recognised that response to recommendations was a university’s responsibility and ‘complete’ could mean a number of things, including that the context that a recommendation was made in had changed and no further activity was planned.

There were no objections to AQA extending this analysis, noting that the intent is to examine the audit system rather than individual universities.

Hot topic 2 – Virtual/remote reviews

All universities in this breakout group had undertaken some form of remote reviews, including CUAP’s Graduating Year Review (GYR) process. The consensus was that remote reviews were feasible, noting the following caveats and areas for further consideration:

- Time zone differences meant that east coast Australia was the easiest place for external reviewers to engage from, although west coast of the USA was also a reasonable option.

- Maintaining engagement over a 2-3 day review period, when not all panel members may be together, and structuring sessions so as to allow for breaks and most effective contribution.
- Reward and recognition for remote panel members.

A further matter discussed with respect to academic reviews was how to deal with recommendations that might be outside the scope of what the programme or department could address, typically recommendations regarding facilities and staffing. Participants discussed how reporting and moderating functions for reviews allowed those sorts of issues to be referred to appropriate parts of a university.

Assessment standards and academic integrity

Universities had taken different approaches to assessment in their responses to Covid-19. Some universities have undertaken substantial reviews of assessment as part of their pandemic response and others were re-thinking aspects of their assessment policies and assessment design. Changes to assessment policy and design also reflected the expectations of new cohorts of learners with experience of NCEA's approach to assessment.

Some universities had removed formal examinations and others had moved to fully online exams. Associated with moves to online exams, universities had explored online monitoring or 'proctoring' of exams and were at different stages of adoption of possible solutions. Concerns around privacy of online monitoring were noted as was the significant amount of work needed to prepare students and staff for online exams.

Participants discussed changing challenges to academic integrity and whether contract cheating was increasing. Some universities are developing or revisiting online academic integrity modules for inclusion in courses.

It was noted that TEQSA had undertaken a great deal of work on academic integrity and their resources, including an academic integrity toolkit, were available on the TEQSA website.

Re-engaging with academic audit

Just before the pandemic started, AQA and the universities had undertaken a series of self-review workshops to help universities prepare for their self-reviews. Since the pandemic started, AQA had converted self-review workshops into an online short course that could be made available to anyone interested. The slides from the audit workshops are also available.

No changes to the audit framework are anticipated, although it might be expected that panels would pay attention to GS 5 (Academic risk management), GS 6 and 7 (enhancement theme), GS 19 and 20 (academic standards and academic integrity) and the all delivery scope statement of the audit framework.

Universities anticipated they would be able to address their response to the pandemic in the framing sections of their self-review reports and include the 'Good Practice Assessments' as part of the evidence for their responses. Efforts should continue to be made to ensure that work is not duplicated.

Universities would like a one-page document from AQA to support their self-review activity. This should include reference to why it is important to engage with academic audit given all the competing pressures on time and work. This, or another document, should also be relevant for students.

Associated with this, participants also discussed options for ensuring that student voice(s) was part of self-review activities and the inter-relationship between good practice and academic audit.

AQA indicated that auditor recruitment, particularly for Māori auditors and for Pasifika auditors, was still ongoing. A pilot and first auditor workshop would be held before the end of June 2021.

The ability of international panel members to travel to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2022 is still unknown at this point. AQA will review protocols developed by other agencies for managing international panel members and outline contingency arrangements. This could include alternative ways in which international panel members engage with panel meetings.

AQA will be in touch with the first universities in the audit cycle to discuss arrangements.

Implications

A series of implications for universities and AQA arose from the Forum.

For universities:

- Include Covid-19 impacts in framing sections for self-review.
- Anticipate that Covid-19 may place more emphasis on the 'all delivery' scope statement for Cycle 6, academic standards and academic integrity (GS 19 and 20), academic risk management (GS 5) and the guideline statements arising from the enhancement theme (GS 6 and 7).

For AQA

- Develop communications material to support self-review activities in universities (what is audit, why is it important, why is it important now) and re-engage people across universities with academic audit.
- Include references to pastoral care code reviews and requirements in supporting materials in audit Guides
- Review protocols regarding international panel member contributions from other external quality assurance bodies and develop contingencies
- Ensure audit panels are briefed on the contexts for universities with respect to the Covid-19 pandemic and national and regional lockdowns.