

The Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework: *Its Success, Deficiencies and Way Forward*

Mahsood Shah
University of Canberra

Mark Wilson
Southern Cross University

Professor. Chenicheri Sid Nair
University of Western Australia

Abstract

Higher education policies related to quality assurance are implemented in many countries. The purpose of such policies are to ensure the provision for high quality education, university accountability and transparency in the use of public funding, confidence of various university stakeholders, competitiveness of higher education in the global arena and meeting the needs of the diverse stakeholders. The current Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework was implemented in the year 2000. While the current framework has served us well with evidence of success, it is clear that the new policy on quality assurance will be more rigorous and it will be implemented in 2011-2013 as a result of the review of higher education in Australia in 2007/2008.

The aims of the paper are to provide a brief history of quality assurance and its evolution in higher education in Australia and to analyse the success and deficiencies of the current quality assurance framework used by the government. The analysis of the framework is based on the views of 40 participants from 25 Australian universities and also the views of the three authors who have been in the quality assurance role in various institutions.

Keywords: Quality Assurance framework

Introduction

Governments have introduced quality assurance policies as part of higher education reforms. Such policies are introduced in many countries to improve quality assurance and university accountability of public funding. The growth of student population including student diversity and the introduction of new kinds of institutions of higher education have resulted in the renewal of quality assurance in many developed countries such as Australia, United Kingdom and other countries. The Australian higher education quality assurance framework was introduced by the commonwealth government in year 2000. The framework has been in place in the higher education sector in Australia for the last ten years. The year 2010 marks the anniversary of the framework and while the government is in the process of renewing quality assurance arrangement post higher education review (Bradley review), it is worth to undertake an analysis on the success and deficiencies of the framework. This paper attempts to provide a brief overview on the evolution of quality assurance in Australian higher education and it then provides an analysis on the success and deficiencies of the current framework. The paper attempts to answer the research question on the extent to which the current Australian higher education quality assurance framework has been effective or 'value add' to the sector and suggestions on future directions which may inform policy directions related to quality assurance.

The paper is based on qualitative study undertaken with 40 participants in the Australian Universities Quality Forum (AUQF) in 2007 (Shah, Miller and Skaines, 2007), on the topic 'Measuring the Impact of External Quality Audit on Universities: Can External Quality Audit be Credited for Improvements and Enhancement in Student Learning? How Can We Measure?'. The paper also includes the views of the three authors who have been in the quality assurance roles in various universities for more than 15 years.

Evolution of Quality in Australian Higher Education

The Australian higher education system comprises, for the most part, autonomous universities established under State, Territory, or Commonwealth Government legislation with the power to accredit their own courses. State/Territory Governments retain the power to accredit individual higher education courses developed and delivered by other providers. In the 1980's, with the absence of a national quality management framework, individual universities were responsible for the development, implementation and enhancement of systems and processes for quality assurance. Major discipline reviews were funded to determine standards and to improve quality and efficiency. While these reviews served to highlight the importance of quality assurance within institutions and across the sector, there was no mechanism to ensure that the recommendations of the reviews were acted upon at the institutional level.

In its 1991 policy statement, Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990's (Baldwin, 1991), the Commonwealth government sought to address the weaknesses of the discipline review approach to quality assurance. The key weakness included lack of consistency in discipline reviews across institutions (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000). The statement announced a comprehensive set of measures to enhance the quality of higher education teaching and research. Over the period 1993-1995, the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (Wilson Committee) reviewed the quality assurance practices and outcomes of public universities and made annual recommendations to the Commonwealth for allocating Quality Assurance and Enhancement element of universities' operating grant (Anderson, Johnson and Milligan, 2000). Although a relatively small component of the overall budget, all public universities chose to participate and the funds were first made available to institutions from 1994 (Commonwealth of Australian, 2000).

Three rounds of independent whole of institution audits were performed under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Program between 1993-1995. The voluntary self-assessment undertaken by institutions under this program fostered an enhanced and enduring awareness of the importance of internal quality assurance and triggered changes in institutional processes as procedural gaps were identified and outcomes measured.

In 1995, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) was established (MCEETYA, 2007) to provide national articulation of awards offered in the Australian vocational education and training and higher education sectors. In 1998 the then Higher Education Council developed a structure which integrated quality improvement into annual Educational Profiles submission now called Institutional Assessment Framework (IAF) to the Commonwealth Department of Education. The submission consists of the university's plans for the triennium in areas such as strategic directions, quality assurance, research and research training, equity, capital management, student load and Indigenous education strategies. The submission is used by the Commonwealth to evaluate university performance and negotiate funding for the triennium. Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans were required of universities from 1998 onwards and were published annually by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA).

In 2000 a number of new policies were implemented as part of quality assurance. They include the following; the Commonwealth government introduced its first quality assurance

framework for higher education along with the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes (MCEETYA, 2000); the introduction of the Education Service for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act (Australian Government, 2000) which is aimed to ensure quality education services and the interests of overseas students, by setting minimum standards and providing tuition and financial assurance; and the formation of an external agency named Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was endorsed (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000).

The quality assurance framework introduced in 2000 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000) consisted of five key elements including: State and Territory responsibility for the registration, re-registration and accreditation of higher education providers other than universities, the role of AUQA in undertaking five yearly cyclical audits, Commonwealth monitoring of universities performance via IAF and other data submissions, the onus on universities to ensure the development and enhancement of quality and standards and finally compliance to various laws, regulations and guidelines such as national protocols and national code. In 2003/2004, the Liberal government initiated a major review of higher education 'Backing Australia's Future' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003). The outcomes of the review resulted in numerous changes such as the introduction of performance based funding for learning and teaching called learning and teaching performance fund (LTPF) using a number of measures such as retention, progression, outcomes of national Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and outcomes of the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) to reward public universities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). The LTPF was discontinued in 2009 by the labour government as a result of the review of higher education in 2008. The liberal government also introduced the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching now renamed Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) to provide funding and grants to public universities to promote and enhance learning and teaching quality. In 2006, the government also reviewed and made further changes to the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes. In 2006/2007 the National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students was substantially revised to improve clarity and to give institutions more flexibility and provide greater protection for international students. The review resulted in the implementation of the national code 2007 which is established under the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000.

In 2007 the Labor government came in power with 'Education Revolution' as a key to the party's political campaign. The government initiated a major review of higher education (Bradley review) which focussed on all aspects of higher education such as funding, provision for higher education to various equity groups, collaboration between vocational and higher education, student experience, research and quality assurance. The findings of the report were released in 2008 along with Commonwealth response to the review recommendations in 2009. As part of higher education reforms, the Commonwealth initiated a review of the ESOS Act and the AQF in 2009. The years 2011-2013 will witness significant changes in higher education policy, directions and funding arrangements as a result of the Bradley review. The Bradley review recommendations related to quality assurance includes the shift from fitness for purpose approach to quality to academic standards and the establishment of a new agency responsible for the registration, accreditation, course approval, external quality audits and performance monitoring of all higher education institutions including universities and for-profit and higher education institutions (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

It is apparent that quality assurance in Australian higher education has consistently evolved and governments played key roles in initiating such reforms to improve the quality assurance of higher education. Some of the contributing factors of the ongoing changes in quality assurance included the growth and massification of higher education, increased diversity of students, increased internationalisation of Australian higher education, rise of private for-profit higher education, increased use of ICT and online learning mode, alarming quality assurance issues emerging from the external quality audits conducted by the Australian

Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in areas such as offshore and governments focus on improving the access and participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education. The continued decline in Commonwealth funding from 60 per cent funding in early 1990's to 40 per cent (Universities Australia, 2009) has significantly affected universities to be able to meet the needs of various stakeholders such as diverse student groups, governments, employers, industry and the broader community. Due to consistent decrease in Commonwealth funding, universities have seriously reconsidered strategies to generate income to ensure self-reliance in uncertain times. Between 2000-2008, a number of multi-campus universities such as University of Western Sydney and University of South Australia closed campuses due to lack of funding and economic sustainability. Within the same period, the Australian media reported that approximately eight universities reported to record financial deficits of more than \$10 million which resulted in restructures realignment of courses, loss of staff due to redundancies, faculty realignment and significant impact on various student support services (McCabe, 2005; Rout, 2007).

It is clear that government policies related to quality assurance with State/Territory government's responsibility to accredit and re-accredit private for-profit higher providers and the revised national protocols for high education have played a key role in the rise of private for-profit higher education. The extension of governments FEE-HELP (government loan given to eligible students to help pay their tuition fees) to private for-profit higher education and vocational education with the growth of students in private for-profit higher education by more than 20 per cent consistently in 2007 and 2008 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) is a testament to the way policy initiatives are encouraging diversity of providers and student choice. Government policies related to performance based funding has also played a key role in strengthening strategies to improve retention and progression rates, student satisfaction and other learning and teaching measures used to reward institutions. Government policy to introduce external quality audits in Australia has played a key role in improving systems and processes for quality assurance. Studies by Shah, Roth and Nair (2010) suggest that external quality audits by AUQA have been very effective in areas such as offshore international education and learning and teaching quality assurance.

Methodology

The methodology used in the study includes qualitative study based on the views of 40 participants from 25 Australian universities at the Australian Universities Quality Forum (AUQF) in 2007. A paper on a similar topic was presented to engage discussion on the success and deficiencies of quality assurance policies in Australian higher education. The views presented on the success and deficiencies of the framework is based on the qualitative feedback from 40 participants and the views of the three authors with experience in managing quality in several institutions including universities and private for-profit higher education.

Success of the current framework

The discussions with the 40 participants strongly suggest that the current Australian higher education quality assurance framework has achieved success at all levels including; government, individual universities, students and other stakeholders. This section of the paper outlines some of the success of the current framework based on the views of the participants and the authors.

Reputation of Australian Higher Education: despite continuous decline in public funding, the quality of Australian higher education is highly regarded, globally. The consistent rise in international student enrolments from 34408 in 1991 to 294000 in 2008 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) with an average of 7 per cent growth in the last three years is a testimony to the success. The 2006 International Student Survey results show that the two important factors that pertain to students choosing Australia as a preferred destination for studies

includes quality of education (95 per cent), and safety and security of the learning and living environment (88 per cent) AEI (2006).

International Ranking: the international reputation of Australian higher education is based on strong university systems in research, learning and teaching and international education. Being a small country with only 39 universities, Australia performs highly on international ranking measured via Times Higher Education and Shanghai Jiao Tong ranking. The 2010 Times Higher Education ranking shows seven Australian universities (18 per cent) in the top 200. The ranking of Australian universities since 2009 and onward has suffered backward trend. The 2008 Times Higher Education ranking shows eight Australian universities (20 per cent and in 2004 14 universities (36 per cent) in the top 200. The downward trend from 14 universities in the top 200 in 2004 to seven universities is significant and it maybe attributed to the growth of student enrolments in universities and academic staff workload and subsequent impact on research output.

Internal Quality Management systems: Australian universities have a long history of having internal systems and processes to assure quality. Some of the internal systems and processes are inline with external reviews such as course accreditation and reviews, self reviews of faculties, research centres and administrative units and ongoing tracking on university performance on various key performance indicators. Some of the many processes used which are in line with international practices include; strategic planning and reviews, governance of universities and active role of the University Council in planning and reviews, risk management practices, ongoing academic program reviews, review of faculty's and schools, review of research centres, review of administrative units, special purpose reviews e.g. offshore international. Other systems and processes also includes development and implementation of academic and non-academic policies and procedures, course development and approvals process, course reviews with industry input, using a range of surveys with stakeholders to assess quality of satisfaction, peer reviews in teaching and research and assessment moderation practices.

The Emergence of Quality cycle: the evolution of quality in Australian higher education and external quality audits by AUQA since 2002 has resulted in the use of various quality frameworks. Many universities have embedded quality cycle within their strategic planning framework. An analysis by the authors suggest that 32 (82 per cent) Australian universities currently use a common quality cycle such as plan, implement, review and improve or approach, deployment, results and improvement. The use of a quality cycle and its integration within the university planning framework have played a key role in promoting staff awareness and communicating about quality, engaging staff in quality and fostering a quality culture (Shah, Nair and Wilson, 2010).

Commonwealth Monitoring: the Commonwealth government has played a key role in direction setting and monitoring of university performance. Each university as part of their funding agreement is required to report to the Commonwealth on an annual basis via the annual Institutional Assessment Framework reporting which includes the planning for triennium in various areas and reporting data to the Commonwealth on learning and teaching and research. The Commonwealth government uses performance data and produces an IAF report which includes trend performance data on various KPIs which are benchmarked with comparable institutions.

Performance Based Funding: since 2006 the Commonwealth government has introduced performance based funding for public universities in learning and teaching. The learning and teaching performance fund (LTPF) used various measures such as retention, progression, course experience measured via the national course experience questionnaire (CEQ) and graduates employment to assess quality outcomes and reward universities. Almost quarter billion dollars was rewarded and the government policy on performance based funding was

criticised and subject to controversy. One of the main criticisms of the government policy was using student satisfaction to measure educational quality and the system and processes used to collect and code student survey, response rates on surveys and lack of audits on university practices in survey distribution, collection and coding of surveys (Coaldrake, 2005). Although the system has been heavily criticised and subject to controversy by many individuals including Vice Chancellors, the government implemented a culture of performance based reward using measures such as retention, progression, outcome of student surveys and graduate employment.

Compliance to Laws and Guidelines: Universities are required to ensure compliance on a number of laws, protocols and guidelines. For many years, universities have been undertaking self reviews against the guidelines to ensure compliance and improvement. Some of the compliance requirements include; compliance to national protocols for higher education approval processes, AQF, ESOS Act and national code and Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS). The external quality audits conducted by AUQA on a five year cycle monitors institutional compliance however some critics argue that external quality audits have failed to monitor university compliance with national protocols for higher education approval processes and AQF.

External Quality Audit: AUQA audits commenced in 2001 with two institutions (University of New South Wales and Charles Darwin University) participating in the trial audit. AUQA commenced the audit of universities in 2002 using the 'fitness for purpose' approach. Cycle one audits focussed on whole of institutions and it was completed in 2007. In 2007 cycle two audits commenced with the focus being on three areas: follow up on a number of selected affirmations and recommendations from cycle one audits, internationalisation theme as a default in almost all institutions and one additional theme based on negotiations with universities using a risk based approach. AUQA also commenced cycle one audits of private for-profit higher education providers in 2007.

Personal experience of the authors in coordinating both cycle one and two audits in six institutions and discussions with 40 participants suggest that the AUQA audit process has had enormous benefit in universities. The process used including; the preparation of the performance portfolio, self reviews, improvements as a result of self reviews outcomes, AUQA visits (onshore and offshore) and post audit follow-up have been instrumental in fostering and promoting quality culture. The audit itself which allows institutions to undertake self review and address areas needing improvement before the actual AUQA audit has been valuable. The participation and voices of stakeholders in the process including senior university leaders, academics, general staff, sessional academics, students, student unions, alumni, employers and research partners is also seen as critical in the process.

Discussions with 40 participants suggest that AUQA audits together with change in government policy and external operating environment have been a driver for change and improvements in universities. Scott and Hawke (2003) argue that a unique benefit of an external quality audit for a university is the extrinsic motivation it provides for that university to document, critique and enhance its internal capability for continuous quality assurance, improvement and innovation. Similar conclusions were reached in a number of studies reviewing university audit processes overseas, for example in South Africa (Wickham, Coetzee, Jones, & Metcalfe, 2007), Denmark (Kristensen, 1997), United Kingdom, New Zealand, Sweden and Hong Kong (Dill, 2000). Changes within a university may happen anyway; however external audits have led to rapid changes and their uptake were definitely enhanced with the fear of the public reports and further scrutiny.

The most recent analysis of all AUQA cycle one audit reports by Ewan (2009) in the learning and teaching area suggests that the opportunity for institutions to undertake self reviews and identification of its own shortcomings and strategies for self remediation has been beneficial.

She suggested that the self review process using external peers enabled institutions to identify weakness and it also enabled institutions to act on the recommendations before the external quality audit. The value add of self reviews as a part of AUQA audit is also confirmed by Adams (2008), suggesting that self-review can play not only a critical role for institutions committed to learning and improvement, but it can also underpin the capacity of an institution to meet external quality assurance requirements.

In 2007, a paper on the impact of external quality audit by Shah, Skaines and Miller (2007) at the AUQF enabled further discussion on the extent to which AUQA audits have been effective. Forty participants from more than 25 institutions attended the session. The recurring themes based on the discussion with participants suggest that audits have been beneficial in the following aspects at the institutional level;

- fostering and promoting quality culture;
- formation of quality committee and key roles such as (PVC, Quality, Directors and Managers) to provide leadership in quality;
- quality grants and funds in some universities as part of achievement in improved quality outcomes;
- integration of strategic planning and quality into a single framework;
- improved alignment between strategic, operational planning and lower level plans;
- engagement of academic and general staff by forming quality reference groups with membership of Deans, Associate Deans, Head of Programs and Directors;
- enhancement in the methodology used to report on KPI and management information capacity;
- evidence based culture in decision making;
- strengthening surveys and feedback mechanisms;
- closing the loop on reviews and student feedback;
- initiation of benchmarking after cycle one audits with selected comparators in areas of strategic benefit;
- strengthened quality assurance of international education particularly offshore operations;
- implementation of various learning and teaching projects such as student retention project;
- improved performance development and review processes for staff;
- the audit process itself with self reviews, improvements, AUQA audits and post audit reviews resulting in changes particularly related to affirmations and recommendations;
- initiating special purpose reviews such as offshore review and community engagement reviews and;
- strengthening the role of planning and quality office to support university quality initiatives.

Shah and Grebennikov (2008), suggest that their experience in a large multi-campus university shows that the external quality audit motivated the university to self-assess and improve its core business and support services. Normally this happens as part of formal review processes, however, the effective use of the external driver led to improvement or innovation as a direct result of review outcomes. Some of the notable improvements included improvement in first year retention rates, trend improvement in CEQ and use of evidence based decision making with effective use of trend and benchmarked performance data.

Course Accreditation: most Australian universities have accredited numerous academic programs with external accrediting bodies. Courses such as nursing, law, medicine, pharmacy, accounting, engineering, construction and many other programs require professional accreditation. The accreditation of courses allows membership of graduates in various professional bodies and it also ensures that courses offered by universities are fit for

purpose according to the standard of professional bodies to meet the changing needs of the industry or profession.

Research Assessment Exercises: the research assessment exercise has enabled universities to engage in peer review to improve research quality and participate in the research exercise such as Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). For more than a decade universities have been involved in preparing annual Research and Research Training submission to the Commonwealth as part of IAF submission.

Recognition of University Qualifications: the current system allows student mobility within Australia. Universities recognise qualifications and unit/subject of study completed by students from other Australian universities. Australian university qualifications are also recognised overseas and our graduates and professionals who are working in almost all parts of the world is a testimony of success.

Student Surveys: a number of survey instruments have been used in all Australian universities for the last 15 years. The Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) which consists of the CEQ and GDS allows all universities to benchmark performance data. The AGS is coordinated by the Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) which is funded by the Commonwealth. The Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) is also used by all universities to measure higher degree research student experience. In addition, the Australasian University Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) enables benchmarking between Australian and New Zealand universities with 25 Australian universities participating in 2007, 29 universities in 2008 and with 35 universities in 2009 (ACER, 2010). The national surveys such as CEQ enable institution to track and improve student experience and benchmarking with comparative institutions.

The Deficiencies of the Current Assurance Quality Framework

As mentioned earlier, the current quality assurance framework used in Australian higher education has served us well with evidence of success. While there are success stories of the current quality assurance framework and related policies, further work is needed to improve the quality and standard of education. Some of the deficiencies of the current quality assurance framework which may be considered while the Commonwealth is currently developing the new framework are as follows;

Quantifiable results: ranking and league tables are generated to compare university performance. Such information is used by students (where to study); for employers (where to find high quality graduates); industry (where to invest in research). The availability of such information in the public domain influences student choice in domestic and international student markets. The United Kingdom's experience suggests that the use of league or ranking tables in newspapers and other media has resulted in 30 per cent increased student applications in top ranking universities in 2001 (Gunn & Hill, 2008). Based on the UK experience, the use of ranking in a demand driven environment may have impact on student recruitment and competition between universities and for-profit private providers. The use of ranking in Australian higher education sector is supported in recent media by Vice Chancellors (Trounson, 2009) who argue that without a policy response to rankings, Australian higher education could fail to maintain a competitive position in the world and falling capacity to attract quality students and staff. The current system does not enable the government to generate quantifiable results of all higher education providers on an annual basis using learning and teaching measures. For example, the data collection and reporting for for-profit higher education is managed by State and Territory government which does not enable comparison except with CEQ indicators with few private for-profit providers participating in the survey.

The Student Experience: students are the most important stakeholders of universities and their experience or knowledge and understanding of higher education must be based on their voices. In other words, student experience is created by students rather than it being defined by universities. Students play a very key role in university management by providing feedback on what they see as most important and their satisfaction. By fostering and promoting engaged partnerships with students, institutions can improve teaching, course design, assessments, and quality processes which produce the best outcomes for students. According to Ramsden (2009), prospective students do need better information about what they can expect from higher education in terms of independence in learning, contact with tutors, and other forms of support. He argues that it is not because it will improve quality by getting students to choose more wisely rather it is because higher education is different compared to school or further education. Institutions need to articulate student expectation and find ways to find out student experience in early stages of study. Such a strategy will enable institutions to act on areas needing improvement in a timely manner.

The current quality assurance framework and learning and teaching measures are more focussed on output rather than the means (input) needed to produce high outcomes. Government policy on using indicators such as CEQ to measure and reward universities based on satisfaction may not improve teaching quality. The growth of student enrolment post 2010 to meet government targets may result in increased staff-student ratio, the need for additional support for students from different equity groups and impact on campus infrastructure and support services. Some of these factors may have a negative impact on student experience and overall satisfaction.

Rewarding for Quality: one of the key ingredients of an effective quality management system is reward based on individual or organisational performance. Reward linked to performance may engage academics and other staff in quality and improvement. Shah and Skaines (2008), suggest that one of the many ways to engage academic staff in quality is to reward individuals or faculties based on their performance. The current quality assurance framework does not provide any reward/incentives based on the outcome of external quality audits and annual institutional assessment framework. While the Commonwealth provided performance based reward via the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF), the system has been criticised and has been subject to controversy. LTPF and its process have in fact damaged the morale of many universities who have been disadvantaged in funding although they have been successful in providing access to students from various equity groups such as first in the family to access university education (Armitage, 2006). One prominent Vice Chancellor reported that lack of audit on survey data collection has raised strong suspicion that some data are corrupted by the shoddy practices in some institutions (Illing, 2005). The formation of the new national regulator post 2011 will witness reward and penalty linked to institutional performance monitoring.

University Complacency: one of the key components of the current quality management framework is universities responsibility to ensure effective and efficient internal quality management system. The AUQA audits of all universities in Australia between 2002-2007 show varying systems and processes to manage quality. While some universities have adopted best practices such as; cyclical course reviews with external input, external assessment moderation and use of external examiners to maintain high academic standards, such initiatives are not consistent in other universities. Studies by Harman & Meek, (2000); Anderson, Johnson and Milligan, (2000) suggest that quality assurance processes in universities vary with some universities approach to pursue rigorous quality assurance across all aspects is almost entirely at their own discretion. An analysis undertaken by Shah & Treloar (2007) of all Australian universities AUQA cycle one audit reports suggest that quality management systems in core areas of the university such as learning and teaching and research vary with common recurring themes related to areas needing improvement across all universities. Some of the recurring recommendations based the analysis by the authors related

to learning and teaching area included: consistent implementation of academic policies, quality assurance for course development and approvals process, student assessments, embedding of graduate attributes in the curriculum, external advice on course development and reviews and tracking learning and teaching performance and initiating improvements.

The analysis of AUQA cycle two audit reports of 16 universities by the authors suggest that some universities have been unsuccessful in closing the loop on cycle one audit recommendations which completed almost five years ago. The closure of many offshore programmes and partnerships as a result of AUQA audits is a testimony of poor and inconsistent quality management and lack of oversight in some universities.

Comparable Academic Standards: academic standards play a critical role in improving the quality of education and research. High academic standards provide confidence to the governments, employers, industry, professional accrediting bodies and to students on the quality of education to meet the current and future needs of the society. Therefore, higher academic standards are also a moral purpose for all higher education institutions which seems to be unseen in the debate and discussion around quality and academic standards. For example, how do we embody and live the virtues of a high quality university? The present system does not ensure comparable academic standards including comparable; degrees, curriculum design, academic processes and assessment. Many critics (Massaro, 2010; Blackmur, 2008; Moodie, 2009) have argued that ten years of external quality audits have failed to monitor academic standards across all higher education institutions as part of the external quality audit.

AUQA's role: the outcome of the Bradley review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) will strengthen the role of AUQA or its successor, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). The current system does not provide power/authority to AUQA to place sanctions or penalty on institutions. Cycle one AUQA audits of universities and other higher education providers show varied quality systems and processes within institutions. Lack of an acceptable quality management system and failure to close the loop on cycle one audit findings should result in penalties to reinforce the need to ensure high quality and standards.

Inconsistent State/Territory policies: the current framework enables State and Territory governments to accredit private for-profit higher education institutions and their courses. The registration and accreditation of private for-profit providers and their courses differ from each State/Territory. In some instances, courses are accredited in one State however the mutual recognition in another State is difficult due to the varying interpretation of the national protocols. Based on the experience of the authors in working with various private for-profit higher education suggest that some State governments have difficult processes for accreditation rather than having rigorous procedures. The annual reporting of performance data for private for-profit higher education in various States and Territories is also inconsistent and does not allow sector benchmarking and comparison on common performance indicators such as retention, progression, completions, graduate outcomes and equity indicators. The current framework has resulted in very poor regulation and planning of private for-profit higher education in Australia with a lack of internal quality management within some private colleges. Problems related to lack of governance and student experience related issues have also emerged in recent media with several commentators suggesting an overhaul of regulations related to the accreditation of private colleges is needed. The problems related to inconsistent State and Territory government registration and accreditation of private for-profit higher education is also outlined in the Bradley review of higher education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

The AUQA audits of private for-profit higher education so far shows poor academic governance of colleges with more focus on maximising profit rather than improving the quality and academic rigor. According to (Shah & Brown, 2009; Shah & Stanford, 2009)

private for-profit higher education providers face significant challenges in maintaining comparable academic standards.

Promoting Quality: The AUQA audits of all universities shows good practices in various areas of the university with some universities receiving very positive audit reports in cycle two audits with evidence of good progress. The success stories and positive audit reports is only known by the university rather than its consumers such as students, graduate employers and research partners. While audit reports are made public, one cannot assume that stakeholders will access the report without its communication. An analysis by the authors on media stories related to AUQA cycle one audits between 2002-2007 of universities suggests only eight positive stories and 28 negative stories despite positive audit reports of some universities who had negative media coverage. The information in relation to quality management and quality assurance of Australian higher education may need to be well promoted and communicated with various stakeholders such as students, staff, employers, industry, governments and individuals. Governments plan to implement *myUni* website maybe the first step to promote quality and performance of higher education providers.

Student Engagement in Quality: students are one of the key stakeholders of the university and they are engaged by providing feedback on surveys and some universities have student membership in governing committees. AUQA audit process enables students to meet the audit panel. Two strategies are proposed by the authors to improve student engagement in quality at a national level. They include students as part of the future external quality audit panel composition similar to the approach used in the UK (QAA, 2009) and secondly the formation of a national student forum which may enable the government to listen to the voices of all cohort of students from various universities and private for-profit higher education providers.

Conclusion and Way Forward

Australian universities have effective quality assurance systems in place. Internal and external reviews have resulted in changes and improvements together with internal and external operating environments. While we have extensive and rigorous quality assurance processes in some universities, there is a real need to ensure that best practices which have proven successful in Australia and around the world are deployed consistently. The development and implementation of the new standards based quality assurance framework need to ensure sustainable approach to quality which is economical and socially sustainable and the benefits must exceed the cost. University and academic autonomy must be maintained and any approach to academic standards based quality assurance must avoid bureaucracy and burden on universities.

Universities must set and maintain their own academic standards; its qualifications must reach a minimum threshold standard and they must be encouraged to pursue their diverse missions, however external agencies such as TEQSA undertake cyclical audits. Universities should also monitor the extent to which graduates are equipped with generic skills after successfully completing the qualification. TEQSA audits together with the proposed new mission - based compacts reporting should be used to reward and penalise institutions. The setting of performance targets by the Commonwealth with individual universities must take into account the university history, its mission, its current performance and its resourcing and infrastructure or means (inputs) needed to achieve Commonwealth targets.

The future higher education policy related to quality assurance should focus on generating sector wide quantifiable results beyond student satisfaction and other learning and teaching measures. The use of external assessment moderation and use of external examiners may also be considered to ensure quality and standard of student assessments and student attainment of generic skills. External examiners have been used in UK since 1830s and it has been reaffirmed and reinforced by the Reynolds report to the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals in the UK

(Reynold, 1986). The UK practice of appointing an external examiner from another institution for each undergraduate course is a distinctive feature of a system that has relied extensively on policing itself on matters of assessment.

The revised framework as planned has to centralise the current State government registration and accreditation of private for-profit colleges to the Commonwealth. To achieve the Commonwealth target in terms of access, participation and success of various equity groups, private for-profit higher education providers play a role in achieving government's aspiration for higher education.

References

Adams, R. (2008) *Self - Review for Higher Education Institutions*, Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Melbourne, Australia.

Armitage, C. (2006) Teaching prize fund 'dreadful'. *The Australian*, November, 2006.

Anderson, D. Johnson, R. & Milligan, B. (2000) Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Australian Higher Education: An Assessment of Australian and international practice, *Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA)*, Canberra, Australia.

Australian Council for Educational Research. (2010) *Doing More for Learning: Enhancing Engagement and Outcomes, Australasian Student Engagement report*. Retrieved on 12 November, 2010 from <http://ausse.acer.edu.au/>

Australian Government. (2000) *Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000*. Retrieved on 12 November, 2010 from <http://aei.gov.au/AEI/ESOS/ESOSLegislation/Default.htm>

Australian Education International. (2006) *International Student Survey*. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from <http://aei.gov.au/AEI/PublicationsAndResearch/Publications/IndustryPublications.aspx>

Baldwin, Hon P. MP. (1991) *Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s*, AGPS, Canberra.

Blackmur, D. (2008) Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes? The Review of the Australian Universities Quality Agency', *Quality in Higher Education*, 14 (3), pp. 249-264.

Coaldrake, P. (2005) Let an umpire decide - The Government's latest university ranking system aims to improve teaching standards, but these critics claim it is more likely to retard real progress. *The Australian*, August, 2005.

Commonwealth of Australia. (2000) *The Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework*. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from <http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/occpaper/00g/00g.pdf>

Commonwealth of Australia. (2000) *Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Australian Higher Education: A national seminar on future arrangements*. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from <http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/pubs/quality/qa.pdf>

Commonwealth of Australia. (2001) Quality of Australian Higher Education: Institutional Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans for the 2001-2003 Triennium. *Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA)*, Canberra, Australia.

Commonwealth of Australia. (2003) Our Universities Backing Australia's future. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/35488/20090212-0001/www.backingaustraliasfuture.gov.au/index.html>

Commonwealth of Australia. (2004) Learning and Teaching Performance Fund: Issues paper Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/learning_teaching/documents/ltp_issues_paper.pdf

Commonwealth of Australia. (2008) Selected Higher Education Statistics. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Publications/HEStatistics/Publications/Pages/Students.aspx>

Commonwealth of Australia. (2008) Review of Higher Education: Final Report. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/highereducation/review/pages/reviewofaustralianhighereducationreport.aspx>

Dill, D. (2000) Capacity building as an instrument of institutional reform: Improving the quality of tertiary education through academic audits in the UK, New Zealand, Sweden and Hong King. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis, Research and Practice*, 2, 211-234.

Ewan, C. (2009) Learning and Teaching in Australian Universities: A thematic analysis of Cycle 1 AUQA Audits, *Australian Learning and Teaching Council*, Sydney, Australia.

Grant, H. & Meek, L, V. (2000) Repositioning Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Australia Higher Education, *Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA)*, Canberra, Australia.

Gunn, R. & Hill, S. (2008) The Impact of League Tables on University Application Rates. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62 (3), pp. 273-296.

Higher Education Funding Council for England. (2009) *Future Arrangement for Quality Assurance in England and Northern Ireland, United Kingdom*. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/HEFCE/2009/09_47/

Illing, D. (2005) Shock rankings for unis. *The Australian*, August, 2005.

Kristensen, B. (1997) The impact of quality monitoring on institutions: A Danish experience at the Copenhagen Business School. *Quality in Higher Education*, 3(1), pp. 87-94.

Massaro, V. (2010) Cui Bono? The Relevance and Impact of Quality Assurance, *Higher Education Policy and Management*, 32 (1), pp. 17-26.

Mccabe, P. (2005) Campus cutbacks - Ourimbah staff face axe amid university deficit. *Daily Telegraph*, February, 2005.

Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. (2007) *Australian Qualifications framework, fourth edition*. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from <http://www.aqf.edu.au/>

Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. (2000) *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes*. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/national_protocols_for_higher_education_mainpage_15212.html

Moddie, G. (2009) Ten years to tell us what we all knew. *The Australian*, June, 2009.

Quality Assurance Agency. (2009) *Handbook for Institutional Audit: England and Northern Ireland*. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/default.asp>

Rout, M. (2007) Uni set to slash arts jobs, subjects. *The Australian*, August, 2007.

Ramsden, P. (2009) A Better Student Experience: Speech at the Group Student Experience Conference, 19 November 2009, United Kingdom. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/detail/2009/a_better_student_experience_speech_by_paul_ramsden

Reynold, P.A. (1986) *Academic Standards in Universities* (London, CVAP).

Scott, G. & Hawke, I (2003) Using an external quality audit as lever for institutional change. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28(3), 323-332.

Shah, M. & Brown, G. (2009) The Rise of Private Higher Education in Australia: Maintaining Quality Outcomes and Future Challenges. *Proceedings of the Australian Universities Quality Forum (AUQF)*. Alice Springs: AUQA (143-150).

Shah, M. & Grebennikov, L. (2008) External Quality Audit as an Opportunity for Institutional Change and Improvement. *Proceedings of the Australian Universities Quality Forum (AUQF)*. Canberra: AUQA (98-103).

Shah, M. & Skaines, I. (2008) Strategic Planning and Reviews in a University: Is it a Myth or Reality? *Proceedings of the Australian Universities Quality Forum (AUQF)*. Canberra: AUQA (104-113).

Shah, M. Roth, K. Nair, S. (2010) Improving the Quality of Offshore Student Experience, *Proceedings of the Australian International Education (AIEC) conference*, October, 2010.

Shah, M. & Stanford, S. (2009) Developing an Effective Tracking and Improvement system for Learning and Teaching: Achievements and Future Challenges in Maintaining Academic Standards. *Proceedings of the Australian Association for Institutional Research (AAIR)*. Adelaide.

Shah, M. & Treloar, K. (2007) External Quality Audit Outcomes in Australia & International and Possible Benchmarking Opportunities. *Proceedings of the Australian Universities Quality Forum (AUQF)*. Tasmania: AUQA (143-151).

Shah, M. Skaines, I. & Miller, J. (2007) Measuring the Impact of External Quality Audit on Universities: Can External Quality Audit be Credited for Improvements and Enhancement in Student Learning? How Can We Measure? *Proceedings of the Australian Universities Quality Forum (AUQF)*, 136-142. Melbourne: Australian Universities Quality Agency.

Shah, M., Nair, S., & Wilson, M. (2010) Quality Assurance in Australian Higher Education: Historical and Future Development, *Journal of Asia Pacific Education review*, forthcoming, December, 2010.

Swedish National Agency for Higher Education. (2009) Proposed new Quality Assurance system, Sweden. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from <http://www.hsv.se/qualityassurance.4.28afa2dc11bdc55748000777.html>

Trounson, A. (2009) Home Grown Rankings Gain Support. The Australian, September, 2009.

Universities Australian. (2009) University Funding and Expenditure. Retrieved on 20 November, 2010 from <http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/content.asp?page=/publications/stats/fexp.htm>

Wickham, S. Coetzee, G. Jones, B. & Metcalfe, A. (2007) HEQC Evaluative Study of Institutional Audits 2006. Pretoria: Higher Education Quality Council.