Academic Staff Views on External Quality Audit: Post Audit Evaluation in a Private Higher Education College

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Abstract

Governments in many countries have funded independent agencies to undertake quality audits of higher education institutions. Such agencies ensure that universities and other higher education providers have effective systems and processes to assure quality assurance in core and support areas. While external quality audits have been in place for a decade in Australia, there is limited research on academic staff views on external quality audit in universities and private higher education providers. This article outlines the views of 40 academic staff in a private higher education college who were directly involved in the external quality audit. A survey was undertaken immediately after the external quality audit to collect the views of academic staff on various aspects of the audit including; self-assessment, audit preparations strategy, communication and staff engagement, and the external quality audit process itself. The authors argue that external quality audit, if effectively managed, could be the driver for change and improvement in quality assurance in a small college.

*Keyword*s: external quality audit, academic staff engagement

Governments in many countries have introduced higher education policies related to external quality audits. External agencies have been established in many countries by the government to conduct quality audits. While the approach used to audit higher education institutions differs between countries, it is clear that that purpose of the audit is to ensure that higher education providers have effective systems and processes to manage and enhance quality in core and support areas. The outcomes of quality audits also enable governments to

assess the quality and standard of higher education institutions and key areas needing improvement. Universities in many countries, including Australia, traditionally had the autonomy to develop, implement and enhance quality and standards with internal review processes. In the last two decade governments have played a greater role in monitoring the quality and standard of higher education to ensure that universities and other higher education institutions are playing a greater role in economic development and meeting the needs of various stakeholders. Other factors such as equity and access agenda, performance-based funding, growth of higher education and the rise of non-university providers have led to the rise of external monitoring and scrutiny.

Review of literature on the effectiveness or impact of external quality audits shows limited empirical research using both qualitative and quantitative methods on the effectiveness of external quality audits or whether audits can be credited for change and improvements. There is also limited research on academic staff views about external quality audit. This article is based on a survey undertaken in a private higher education college in Australia with 40 academic staff who were involved in the external quality audit. The aim of the survey was to assess academic staff satisfaction with the strategy used by the college to prepare for the quality audit and their satisfaction of the audit process itself.

Most of the literature on academic staff views about external quality audit is based on university experience and they are based on opinions of individual researchers, rather than systematic data collection. The vast majority of literature is based on anecdotal evidence and it reflects two opposite viewpoints. First, audits have not transformed higher education and do not contribute to institutional improvement and enhancement of the student learning experience (Harvey, 2002; Newton, 2000). Change takes place in the institutions due to internal reviews and due to internal and external operating environments. Second, audits, if managed effectively and aligned well with internal systems and processes, will motivate universities to self-assess and improve their core business and support services (Dill, 2000; Fourie & Alt, 2000; Kristensen, 1997; Stensaker, 1997; Wahlen, 2004; Weusthof, 1995; Woodhouse & Meade, 2000). External audits with an improvement-led culture have had positive result with the use of self-assessment, external peer review, improvements and follow-up. In other countries, external audits have been condemned due to the processes used with compliance or inspectorate-driven regime rather than improvement and they have failed to engage academic staff.

Brief Overview of Private Higher Education in Australia

The current Australian university sector consists of 36 public, three private and one overseas university. It is perhaps not widely known that the higher education sector also includes more than 160 private higher education providers (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) that offer and confer qualifications at all levels in the Australian Qualifications Framework. These qualifications hold equal legal status equivalent to that of university degrees (Shah & Brown, 2009). As of 2008, private higher education enrolments in Australia were 64,092 (6% of the total student population). The growth of private higher education in 2008 was 20.8% compared to 2.6% in public universities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). The number of private higher education colleges has also grown from five in 2000 to approximately 160 in 2009. Based on this trend it is predicted that by 2020 private higher education in Australia will contribute approximately 30% of total higher education enrolments in Australia. The potential in private higher education is reflected in the transformation of private providers over the last decade from small Australian-owned businesses providing non-

accredited training to ownership by well resourced overseas consortiums providing accredited training.

The external quality audit of private higher education providers commenced in 2008 and it is expected that the cycle 1 audit with private providers will be completed in 2015. The audit of private providers is against four Quality Audit Factors (Australian Universities Quality Agency [AUQA], 2010). They include: governance and management, learning and teaching, administration and support services, and quality management and continuous improvement. An analysis undertaken by Shah and Lewis (2010), shows that the recurring areas needing improvement, based on the release of 19 audits reports of private colleges, include: institutional governance; strategic planning and resourcing; compliance-driven quality culture rather than improvement; academic leadership; sessional lecturers making up almost 100% teaching; lack of research culture where teaching is informed by research; lower admissions criteria; poor recognition of equity and diversity, with low access and participation of student from underrepresented groups; lack of staff professional development and, finally, huge reliance on international market and international student income with a focus on few discipline areas, such as accounting and hospitality management.

Brief Review of Literature

Jeliazkova and Westerheijden (2002) argue that some of the contributing factors of the emergence in external quality audit include: serious doubts about educational standards, doubts about the efficiency of the higher education system and institutions, doubts about innovation capacity and quality assurance capacity of institutions, and the need to stimulate quality culture in institutions. Stensaker (2003) suggests that external quality audits serve various purposes including: accountability for the use of public funds; improving the quality of higher education provision; informing students and employers; stimulating competitiveness; providing a quality check on non-university institutions; enabling mobility of students and making an international comparison.

According to Vught Van and Westerheijden (1994), the factors that have contributed to a recent increase in the attention for quality in higher education include the rapid growth of the student body and accompanying increase in the number of fields of study, public expenditure for higher education and increased costs of higher education systems. They suggest the general model of quality assurance based on USA, Canada and Western European countries includes external agencies monitoring quality, self-evaluations within the institution with the view that academics need to trust their own process, peer review process with the use of external experts and, finally, the use of assessment outcome and linking performance funding.

Internationally, there is agreement that the quality audit process has raised awareness of quality and systems and increased communication and transparency of accountability (Anderson Johnson, & Milligan, 2000; Caroll, 1997; Dill, 2000). Based on UK, New Zealand, Sweden and Hong Kong experience, the external quality audits have: increased responsibility for improving teaching and student learning; facilitated active discussion and cooperation within academic units on means to improve teaching and student learning; provided clarification of responsibility for improving teaching and student learning in faculties, and provided information on best practices both within the institution and across the systems (Dill, 2000). Another study in New Zealand suggests that audit process has been effective in encouraging a cultural shift in the universities with respect to quality matters, though penetration has been uneven across the sector. However, there is broad acknowledgment

within universities that positive benefits have resulted and the outcome has been worth the cost (New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit [NZUAAU], 1997). Another report suggests that external quality audit has acted as a stimulus and catalyst for universities to build robust quality systems (NZUAAU, 2001). The New Zealand experience shows that quality reviews have caused universities to examine and monitor processes in ways they had not done before. Under such examination, defects have been identified and addressed, rather than lingering to face public exposure (Woodhouse & Meade, 2000).

According to Harvey and William (2010), academics see quality assurance as burdensome and it has failed to be part of the everyday activity of academics because they perceive no real link between quality and their academic work. According to Harvey (2005), quality monitoring in the UK has been beset by overlapping and burdensome processes (also Laughton, 2003), competing notions of quality, a failure to engage learning and transformation, and a focus on accountability and compliance. The UK experience suggests that external reviews by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) were perceived with distrust by academics, and as a costly and bureaucratic exercise (Cheng, 2009). Studies undertaken by Newton (2002) on whether external quality monitoring has led to improvement suggest that academic staff do not mutely accept change or the particular demands of quality assurance policy or systems. His experience in Wales suggests that external audits encouraged team-based action planning and increased dissemination of good practice that resulted in improvements in student experience. Anderson (2006) suggests that academics will continue to resist quality processes until university management, university quality agencies and academic staff in universities draw on mutually agreed understanding of the contested concepts of quality.

A study at Sheffield Hallam University sought academics' perceptions of the different external monitoring processes in England. They found that some processes, notably external examination, were perceived as providing a check on standards; however, there was little support for the view that external quality evaluation improved the student learning experience (Harvey & Newton, 2004).

External Audit of the Private College

This study relates to a private higher education college that provides vocational and higher education courses to almost 10,000 students. The college commenced its preparation of the external quality audit in 2008 with the recruitment of the Director to lead the preparations of the audit. The college held the view that external quality audit should be used to enhance quality assurance in its core business of learning and teaching. The college has had experience in vocational audits driven by a compliance regime and accreditation or re-accreditation of courses via the state department of education. In preparation for the audit, the college formulated an external quality audit strategy that included seven key steps:

- organisation-wide self-review aimed at identifying areas of good practice and areas needing improvement
- ongoing communication with staff and students
- operationalising stakeholder survey policy to implement systematic approach to student feedback and improvement
- closing the loop on self-review recommendations and findings of the various stakeholder surveys
- preparation of the self-assessment performance portfolio for AUQA
- managing the logistics of the audit visit

- post audit progress report.

The preparations for the external quality audit in the private college 18 months before the AUQA audit enabled the college to undertake various reviews and prioritise areas needing improvement. It can be argued that such improvement could have happened as a result of internal reviews and the growth of the college. However, the external audit acted as a catalyst with an urgency to act on various areas with fears of further scrutiny and public report. As a publicly listed company with shareholders, the college acted on areas needing improvement in a systematic manner to ensure that its brand and reputation is maintained with a positive stakeholder image of the college as the institution experiences growth in both domestic and international markets.

Some of the notable improvements as a direct result of the self-review and the preparations for the external quality audits included:

- review of the governance structure and terms of reference of the governing committees
- self-review of the key governing committees
- development of induction pack for committee members
- self-review against key national policies used to accredit private providers
- development of a range of surveys to collect student experience
- implementing improvement projects as a direct result of student voice
- active engagement and partnership with student representative council in improving student experience
- benchmarking performance data with the sector and selected partners
- streamlined reporting to the academic board and other committees on key performance indicators on 15 measures
- effective engagement of faculties by providing performance-based reward
- implementation of inaugural staff survey to measure staff satisfaction
- implementation of fully funded professional development program for teaching staff
- improving assessment practices via external assessment moderation with two public universities
- strengthening the role of the course advisory committees to ensure industry input in course development and review processes
- evidence-based decision-making in relation to course reviews and improvement
- assessing graduate attributes via 3-yearly employer surveys
- increasing opportunities for students to undertake work-based learning via employer collaboration
- fostering and promoting an improvement-led culture.

Methodology

The paper-based survey was used with 11 quantitative items and two qualitative questions. The 11 quantitative items enabled participants to rate on a five-point Likert scale with 1 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *neutral* and 5 = *strongly agree*. The survey questionnaire included items similar to those used in another Australian university as part of their post audit evaluation with staff. The survey was distributed to all academic staff participating in the external quality audit and all staff completed the survey immediately after each session of interviews with the panel members. The response rate was 100%.

Findings and Discussion

The quantitative findings of the survey are presented in Table 1 below. The results suggest that academic staff had very positive experiences of the overall audit preparation with all items scoring above 4.00 mean on a five-point Likert scale. Respondents rated very high satisfaction (*Mean* = 4.61) on the helpfulness of staff directly involved in the audit preparations. The item related to the atmosphere during the audit interview as friendly/pleasant/comfortable scored the highest mean rating in the survey (*Mean* = 4.51). The overall result presented in Table 1 suggests that the strategy deployed prior to the external quality audit was effective in achieving positive results that could be used in the future. Staff viewed the external quality audit preparations, including the self-review, as a key driver for change and improvement. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to write comments on key improvements as a direct result of the audit preparations. The recurring improvements identified by the respondents included: accountability of key staff, improved policies and procedures, student feedback process and using results to improve student experience, focus on improving learning and teaching quality, improved communication between students and lecturers on actions taken as a direct result of student feedback, benchmarking and assessment moderation with the use of external peers, evidence-based decision-making at faculty level, continuous improvement of culture and staff connection and a sense of belonging to the college.

Respondents were asked to identify the best aspect of external quality audit and they wrote extensive comments. Some of the recurring themes that emerged included: improvement-led audit culture, friendly and open atmosphere, facilitated the development and enhancement of quality in the college, identification of areas of concern, opportunity to self-assess with the view to improve, the self-assessment portfolio provided a snapshot about the college, professional development of staff on quality, transparency of the process and the professionalism of staff involved. Respondents also identified one area needing improvement, the need for more briefings and information sessions with staff on aspects of the external quality audit.

Table 1

Academic Staff Views About External Quality Audit

Items	Mean Score	Rank*
The self-assessment undertaken in late 2008 enabled the colleges to identify areas needing improvement	4.21	10
The AUQA audit preparations from 2008 to date has been a key driver for improvements	4.00	11
The information sessions and forums were useful for communication and raising staff awareness	4.27	8
The AUQA audit preparation at the colleges was effective	4.40	5
The Performance Portfolio prepared for AUQA audit accurately represented the college	4.29	7
The communication about my participation in the audit was received in a timely manner	4.23	9
The information sessions with all staff in faculties were useful	4.41	4
The briefing session before the audit was useful	4.38	6
The atmosphere during the AUQA interview could be described as friendly/pleasant/comfortable	4.51	2
The logistics of the overall AUQA audit is well managed	4.46	3
The staff directly involved in AUQA audit preparation were helpful	4.61	1

* Ranking based on mean ratings

The public report on the external quality audit of the college was positive with commendations on a number of areas where improvements were made as a direct result of the self-review. Some of the commendations directly linked to the improvements after the self-review included: genuine review with emphasis on quality enhancement, effective industry involvement in course design and development, college's approach to external assessment moderation, systematic use of stakeholder feedback to improve teaching quality. One of the significant commendations also in the AUQA Good Practice database as an exemplar of good practice is related to quality management framework and benchmarking. The panel commended the college for its approach to quality management and, in particular, the use of performance data and internal and external benchmarking. Based on the analysis of almost 60 cycle-1 audit reports of universities and private providers as of February 2011, the college is the first institution to be commended on its approach to quality management and benchmarking. Benchmarking is in fact one of the most recurring recommendations in almost all university and private college reports. Various thematic analyses on recurring themes based on AUQA audit reports by (Ewan, 2009; Martin, 2003; Stella & Liston, 2008; Woodhouse & Stella, 2007) have suggested benchmarking as an area needing improvement across the sector.

Conclusion

It is clear from this study that external quality audits, if effectively coordinated and managed, could have enormous benefit for institutions. Such audits encourage and, in some cases, force the institutions to self-assess their quality assurance arrangements and identify areas needing improvement to avoid public scrutiny with fears of negative public audit report and media scrutiny. The strategy used in a small private college has been effective in engaging academic staff in quality and also resulting in positive changes. Such changes have resulted as a direct result of internal self-reviews undertaken in preparation for the external quality audit. The college used audit as an opportunity to drive change and improvement in academic and non-academic areas. The analysis of almost 26 audit reports of private higher education colleges in Australia shows a significant need for quality management and capacity building in higher education quality assurance.

The challenge for the growing private higher education sector is to build quality management capacity at a time when more focus has been on growing student population and maximising profit. The private higher education sector will need to demonstrate that its systems and processes for quality assurance and academic standards are equivalent to those used by universities and other providers. There is a real need for investment in capacity building in quality management in private colleges with the view to ensure that the growth of private colleges does not compromise quality and standards.

This case study has clearly demonstrated the need to engage academic staff in quality assurance and improvement. The strategies deployed by the small private college engaged academic and other staff in quality to ensure staff ownership at faculty level.

While there are successful case studies, such as the college studied in this article, the challenge is to gain momentum so that further enhancement is implemented to improve quality with a continuous improvement culture. External quality audits in the last ten years with their focus on processes have set a platform for the next phase of developments of quality assurance in Australian higher education. The improvement-led audit has encouraged higher education institutions to improve systems and processes for quality assurance and the timing is perfect for the renewal of quality with more focus on outcomes and standards.

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