Quality assurance in New Zealand universities:

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Quality Assurance in New Zealand Universities
—Interviews with Universities New Zealand and New Zealand Universities Academic Unit

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(Erina Ogawa)
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Erina Ogawa

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Introduction
New Zealand’s system of quality assurance of its universities is well established. With the aim of obtaining insight into this system for the benefit of my colleagues at Toyo University who are involved in decision-making either regarding the development of new academic subjects and qualifications or regarding the audits or quality maintenance of existing courses, I took the opportunity of being in New Zealand during my summer vacation to obtain interviews with both the person who oversees the birth of new subjects and qualifications at New Zealand universities, as well as the person in charge of university audits. On the morning of Thursday, August 26th, 2010, I interviewed Angela Werren (Manager, Academic Policy, Te Pokai Tara Universities New Zealand) for approximately one hour about the role of her organisation. This was followed by a shorter interview of approximately twenty minutes with Jan Cameron (Director, New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit) regarding the audit process and purpose. Below, I summarise their answers.

1. Angela Werren from Universities New Zealand:

Q: New Zealand has two systems of quality assurance for its tertiary education sector. Please explain the difference between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) system, which governs high schools and tertiary institutions other than universities, and the university system?

A: The university system is based on peer review and does not involve visits; whereas, the NZQA system involves a panel going to the tertiary provider. However, if a university is joining with another provider, such as an Institute of Technology and Polytechnic (ITP), then we will visit the provider to see if it is okay. Unfortunately, there is a spanner in the works related to quality assurance because the Minister of Tertiary Education has said that he would like all qualifications under one umbrella, presumably the NZQA, but the Education Act
1989 gives us the right to run our own sector as we always have done. Universities have been in New Zealand for over one hundred years. 1870 saw the establishment of the first university in New Zealand, the University of Otago. The University Act, which came into effect on 1 January 1962, says that there is a committee (known as the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee\(^{(1)}\)) and that in effect universities will do what the committee tells them to do. The Act also set up the University Grant Committee (UGC) with a basic function to receive the cake (government funding) and slice it up amongst the universities. Then, there was an Education Act in 1989 which did all sorts of things at school level, but it was the Amendment Act to that Act in 1990 which set up the NZQA and made it possible for providers other than universities to offer degrees and gave us the right to regulate our own sector. The NZQA mopped up a lot of what the UGC used to do, including the running of the university entrance examinations. We got the scholarships function out of the UGC. And, the government took the NZ$26 million that had been saved by the UGC and disbanded the UGC.

**Q:** What monetary benefit does the government give to universities now?

**A:** New Zealand universities are partly funded by the government now on a per capita basis, up to a certain limit. Universities are funded up to 3% above their target enrolments by varying amounts depending on the courses, since some courses cost more to run than others (e.g. Art courses are generally cheaper than Science courses, which have laboratory components in them). International students must pay full tuition as there is no government funding for them. Unfortunately, you cannot budget for international students as there is a fashion regarding which country's students go to study in which country (e.g. New Zealand will get a lot of South American students and then they will go somewhere else, then many Koreans will come and then go).

Universities claim firstly that they are definitely not owned by the government and secondly that the majority of their funding does not come from the government but from research works and other funds they have generated themselves. There is never enough funding because the per capita funding amount is decreasing, whereas costs are increasing.

**Q:** What is the role of Universities New Zealand now?

**A:** A short way of describing us is to say that we are an inter-university policy coordination body. We are not Head Office. We cannot dictate to the universities. They are autonomous; they run their own businesses. But, sometimes it is very appropriate that we agree on a particular policy, such as university entrance requirements.
**Q:** What are the current university entrance requirements?

A: Before 1986, schools granted university entrance based on school examinations. From 1986 to 2004 there were Bursary examinations (nationwide examinations). 2005 saw the first intake of students under the New Zealand Certification of Achievement (NZCA). This is the current entrance standard. The law (the amendment in 1990) gives the responsibility for setting university entrance to NZQA but they must do this through consultations with the universities and us. The current standard was set after comprehensive consultation, including with private providers and members of the Maori and Pacific Island communities, but in hindsight it is a very complicated system (requiring students to obtain mathematical ability and linguistic ability at different stages over their last three years of schooling and obtain credits from a list of set subjects) so is being reviewed. This system is likely to be simplified and the standard is likely to be raised although it is unlikely that the number of students who enter university will decline (as many already chose not to go to university). Also, universities cannot accept all of the students who want to come because of government funding caps.

So, selection is the name of the game and for selection you need to know how well a student has done, not just that they have obtained the minimum entrance requirement. Therefore, NZQA is developing a system based on the Australian system as a means to derive a score for school achievement. Actually, only recently all of the Australian states (except for Queensland which is totally different) have decided on one system where they turn a lot of numbers into a single score. Of course, once New Zealand has a ranking system schools will also be ranked which is undesirable.

New Zealand also has a number of high schools offering Cambridge Exams and a few, perhaps five or six, offering the International Baccalaureate (IB). State high schools can offer Cambridge but they must offer NZQA. Private high schools can choose to ditch NZQA and offer Cambridge or IB or whatever. Universities know how to deal with these applicants, for example they currently accept students with fully completed IBs but are looking at accepting students with nearly completed IBs. New Zealand universities recognise both the Cambridge Exams and IBs as being very good qualifications.

**Q:** Apart from University Entrance, what are some other roles of your organisation?

A: Another major role is administering scholarships. We offer over forty scholarships. Some are under-graduate but most are graduate scholarships. Some are government funded but most are privately funded from sponsors.
Q: Could you tell me more about the inter-university policy coordination?
A: Universities in New Zealand are not self-accrediting; they cannot decide to run a course and then start it the next day. They must ask me. If it is a new qualification, or even a new subject (we must check that the infrastructure is available, such as having enough books in the library on that subject), or a major change to something already existing, they have to apply to me. Then, I ask my committee. There are two rounds each year: one submission by the 1st of May with a meeting the end of July and a second submission by the 1st of September with a meeting the end of November. Between submission and meeting, an awful lot goes on in the universities!

The peer review system means that every university gets every other university’s proposals. In the unusual case that a university wants to offer something that no one else in the country offers, I will find an overseas expert for advice. But, normally I send proposals to each of the universities as zip files attached to an email and the universities find the appropriate people to read them and make comments. I let the universities decide who to pass them on to because sometimes universities have experts in the woodwork, such as the university who has a world-renown computer graphic expert although the university does not offer courses in the subject. Everybody sends comments back to the university concerned, as well as to me. Sometimes these comments are in the form of encouragement, sometimes they ask for clarification, and sometimes they point out concerns. The comments are all anonymous in the sense that the university name is known but the individual making the comments is not named (although academics often can guess as they often know who their counterparts are at certain universities). We inherited this process from the UGC; it has been used since 1962. Currently, universities cannot read comments by other universities but I hope to change this process before I retire into a closed forum so that all parties can read all comments. Everyone does their job well and uses polite language with a cooperative spirit of give and take.

Two weeks before the meeting, postal votes are held to determine whether or not a proposal is approved. The representatives from each university who make up the NZVCC are the people who vote on the advice of others from their respective universities. To give an idea of numbers, there might be about 90 proposals in a round, and about 70 of them will be approved by postal vote. The people behind the proposals which do not get accepted work furiously for two weeks and many do receive approval before the meeting. For example, in the last meeting we only discussed 5 proposals from the 11 not approved by postal vote. Sometimes we start a meeting and somebody announces that some issue has been resolved and the proposal gets approved immediately.

Meetings are started by me putting a proposal and all of the correspondence
related to that proposal on the table. Next, the proposing university says where the problems lie. Then, each of the querying universities points out their position. Other universities remain silent. Usually issues are resolved from discussion. Often one university likes to do things a different way to the proposing university or believes that the order should be different (something should be taught before something else). If there is just one minor objection from one other university we give the proposal approval as it is just a matter of a difference of opinion between academics. However, if there is a major problem or if the only universities who offer similar courses have objections (other universities cannot be expected to have informed opinions), we ask for resubmission in two weeks’ time with revisions. Sometimes universities withdraw their proposals but rarely are they declined. Sometimes we leave the proposal on the table. There was an unusual case when a proposal did not meet the registered definition of a Masters Degree but we had sympathy for it so we re-wrote the definition and then approved the proposal. This system would be much harder to do with a larger number of universities. New Zealand only has eight universities so it is like a family where we squabble but we all support each other. Britain, Canada, the US, and Australia all have autonomous systems. As far as I know, they can start qualifications without having to ask somebody like me. On the other hand, other countries have centralised systems where the government decides what the universities will offer. They will all have their own systems of quality assurance. Academic audit is internationally the flavour of the decade. I remember a conference I went to in Hong Kong in 1991. Hong Kong is where academic audit was born and one of the men behind it, David Woodhouse, was the Deputy Director of the Hong Kong Council of Academic Registration. He then become the Director of the New Zealand Academic Audit Unit and is now in Australia.

**Q:** Listening to your explanation, it appears to me that this system means that new courses would be less likely to fail as they receive peer advice before they begin. **Is this correct?**

**A:** We require them to report within three years of the first cohort finishing, whatever it is, whether a new subject or a new qualification. I provide the format for a Self Report and this is conducted within the university and must include at least one person from outside the discipline area and name the people involved. It is four pages long with lots of statistics and ends with a statement regarding whether or not they will continue this subject or qualification. Although initially people were unwilling to go through this process and it was not done well, the great value in this process is now recognised. The reports are seen by the university’s Academic Board and by my committee. Sometimes, they receive much less students than they expected and Academic Boards decide that they will
not continue to fund it. After that, they are on their own, apart from the Academic Audit. Some have been focused audits such as looking at research, but the current audit is an overall institution audit.

**Q:** Your organisation is not involved in degree approval for ITPs, is that correct?  
**A:** We used to but decided in 2005 that we were not adding value. It was a lot of work and they were going to run degrees without doing research. The universities were very keen to ensure that these new degrees were backed by research as the Act requires. It is a legal requirement that anybody teaching a Bachelor’s Degree must be actively engaged in research. This does not just apply to universities, but to anybody teaching degree programmes. They still have the panels but we refuse to help them. Theoretically, all degree programmes in New Zealand are backed by research but I can only guarantee that those offered by universities are. Unfortunately, this has created a two-tiered system. New Zealand universities do not like to admit students into post-graduate programmes from a non-university degree and some post graduate courses even state that candidates must have a New Zealand university degree. But I am sure that some of these graduates are fine and some universities should accept them. I have no data on this matter but am commenting on the general feeling that these graduates are not particularly welcome.

**Q:** What about extramural students? I have heard that in some countries, such as the US, extramural degrees are not as highly valued as internal ones are? Can you say that an extramural degree is of the same quality as an internal one?  
**A:** Definitely. No university in New Zealand wants to jeopardise their reputation. We are quite highly regarded in some places. We send excellent scholars overseas who do very well internationally.

**Q:** Does your organisation have anything to do with course evaluation and lecturer evaluation by students and other stakeholders?  
**A:** No, nothing at all.

**Q:** But you have self-evaluations coming back from the people running the courses?  
**A:** From the actual people in the programme concerned, yes.

**Q:** What other roles does Universities New Zealand have?  
**A:** I am not personally involved, but the Vice Chancellors meet six times a year for weighty matters such as funding issues, research issues, research relationships, a computer network used by the universities, animal testing, the NZQA, and
legislative change (which is very hard to achieve).

Q: Japan has a general nationwide system whereby students must attend two-thirds of their classes to pass a course. Do New Zealand Universities have attendance criteria?
A: No. It is the student's own responsibility to make sure that they produce the assignments and pass tests to meet the Terms Requirements. Lectures are often online so students can catch up if necessary.

Q: Does New Zealand have issues like elite athletes who miss classes or students missing classes due to work experience for other courses or for job hunting?
A: If work experience is part of the course, it will be accounted for. If you are doing two degrees and one has work experience, it is your own risk really. It comes down to being responsible for meeting your Terms Requirements.

Q: What makes you confident that the New Zealand university system produces quality education?
A: We win international scholarships. Our graduates go overseas and get good jobs in other countries.

Q: Looking from your perspective, what general advice do you have for university administrators in order to control quality standards within their faculty or area of responsibility?
A: I ran a faculty once. You need to have a good education yourself, which I do not particularly have myself: I only have a Bachelor's degree but I have over 30 years of experience. Have bags of initiative. Foster good relationships with colleagues, especially academic colleagues who can help you. And of course foster relationships with your counterparts in other faculties and other universities because you can learn from everybody else.

Q: What advice do you have from your perspective for university lecturers to ensure their courses are of international standard?
A: I cannot answer that question since I have never been a teacher. I am an administrator. I speak English as a native: I would hate to have to teach it. Every word in English seems to have four different meanings in another language!

Q: In my courses, I try to get my students to use English to be ready for the international business world. I often take a practical, rather than an academic focus. Can you comment on this?
A: Well, one of the first requirements for a proposal of a new subject or qualification is that there must be evidence of its acceptability to employers. There must be a reason for the study other than obtaining a qualification.

2. Jan Cameron from New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit:

Q: What is the role of the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit?
A: The Audit Unit conducts five yearly institutional audits of universities.

Q: Does this involve finances? Do you audit existing courses which have been approved by Universities New Zealand?
A: It does not involve finances or programmes of study. It is an academic audit of quality assurance processes. We check assurance processes, evaluate them, and give feedback either that each process is good or that it requires improvements. We check that there are processes, that they use them, and that they work. It is a good practice audit not a compliance audit: it is not standards based, but process based. The Tertiary Education Commission is the university funding agent and is where universities have to report to on performance indicators. We audit universities on objectives but do not make judgements, unless in extreme cases.

Q: In business terms, would you say that you audit a university’s mission statement?
A: Yes, we audit mission statements and strategic planning documents. We ask questions about how appropriate their statements or processes are. We make comments such as that the evidence suggests that in no case they did x, y or z, despite them claiming to do so.

Q: What is involved in an audit?
A: The self review process is extremely useful but it is the audit visit that makes the university do it. Each university has some kind of Quality Assurance Unit. I can only tell you about the one I used to be part of at the University of Canterbury. There were about 75 to 100 staff. Working groups were set up for each theme of the audit. They were predominantly academic staff but also included students.

Q: Students are part of the working groups?
A: New Zealand universities, like those in Europe, have a lot of student involvement in all teaching and learning processes. After all, they are the consumer.

Q: How do you choose the students who participate? Through the Student
Union? What do they get out of it?
A: Sometimes through the student union, sometimes through class representatives, sometimes individual students are just asked if they want to be involved. They get to be involved in affecting the teaching and learning process.

Q: What is a positive aspect about New Zealand’s audit process?
A: The peer review process which uses other universities. Audits are performed by trained auditors who are mainly university academics and one overseas person who is familiar with the New Zealand system. The people conducting the audits know the New Zealand university system very well.

Q: What is a negative aspect about this process?
A: The New Zealand system is fragmented. There is time wastage for universities who have to report the same information to three different arms: to Universities New Zealand for programme approval, to the Audit Unit for audits, and to the Tertiary Education Commission for funding. Fortunately, we have good communication between these three arms.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?
A: One thing I should mention is that both Angela’s unit and mine are also subject to audit. Last time, my unit audited Angela’s unit and an external auditor was brought in for mine. These were also process audits asking, “Are the processes robust?”

Q: What question are universities asked in their audits?
A: Do you know what you are doing and why you are doing it and is it effective and how do you know this?

【Notes】
(1) New Zealand Vice-Chancellors’ Committee branded themselves Universities New Zealand on 5th August 2010, just weeks before this interview. They also adopted a Maori (the native language of New Zealand) name, Te Pokai Tara, the Caspian Tern (a bird which flies to New Zealand) which fly in groups and tend to fly upwards. Legally, they still are the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors’ Committee.

(2010年9月10日受理)