## Quality in Higher Education

## Designing Academic Audit: Lessons learned in Europe and Asia

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# Designing Academic Audit: lessons learned in Europe and Asia

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ABSTRACT *As growing numbers of countries adopt market-oriented policies for steering higher education, there is increasing interest in accountability mechanisms that improve the capacity of colleges and universities to independently assure the quality of their academic degrees and student learning. Academic audit, first developed in the UK and subsequently adapted to countries such as Sweden, New Zealand and Hong Kong, offers such an approach. What problems have these countries encountered in implementing academic audits with regard to: the focus of audits; the selection and training of audit teams; the nature of audit self-studies; the conduct of audit visits; audit reports; and audit follow-up and enhancement activities? This paper reviews the lessons learned from these early experiments with academic audit and suggests guidelines for the design and implementation of effective audit processes.*

## Introduction

As academic quality assurance agencies and activities proliferate around the globe, there is an increasing realisation that the form of academic accountability employed must be consistent with the rapidly changing environment of higher education. Global economic forces and public policies in numerous countries are dramatically altering the operating context of colleges and universities from one of regional monopolies and incremental change to one of international competition and rapidly changing social needs (Dill & Sporn, 1995). As a consequence, higher education organisations are becoming self-regulating institutions, developing capacities for innovation, adaptation, and entrepreneurial behaviour (Clark, 1998; Sporn, 1999). In this new context the three modal forms of academic quality assurance, institutional accreditation, subject assessment, and academic audit, have different strengths and weaknesses.

Accreditation as developed in North America determines whether an institution or a particular programme meets threshold quality criteria. The focus of accreditation is comprehensive, examining the mission, resources, and procedures of an institution or academic programme. However, in the new environment, the US form of institutional accreditation has come under increasing criticism. The process is perceived to be too comprehensive, too formulaic, too expensive in terms of administrative and staff time, adding too little value particularly on issues of educational quality and effectiveness (Ewell, 1999).

In contrast to accreditation, subject assessments, as implemented in countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK focus on the quality of delivered performance, either teaching and learning or research, at the subject or programme level. That is, assessment goes beyond accreditation to make graded judgements about academic quality

levels rather than a binary judgement relative to threshold standards. However, subject assessments also have weaknesses in the new competitive environment [1]. The rapid expansion of subject fields in the new context of mass higher education, and particularly the rapid development of new interdisciplinary programmes for which there may be a limited number of external peers, raises questions as to whether systematic external review of all subjects is feasible over time. Furthermore, as universities develop more sophisticated management systems featuring internal evaluation and assessment procedures, external subject reviews carried out on a timetable set by an external agency and unconnected to institutional administrative processes are increasingly seen as redundant and ineffective. In the UK, Denmark, and the Netherlands, where external subject assessments have been comprehensively implemented, Vice Chancellors and Rectors are seeking institutional responsibility over programme review [2].

Academic audits, like college or university accreditation, are directed at the institution level. Unlike accreditation or subject assessments, however, academic audits make no attempt to comprehensively review an institution's or programme's resources and activities, nor to directly assess the quality of teaching or student learning. Rather academic audits are focused on those processes by which academic institutions exercise their responsibility to assure academic standards and improve the quality of their teaching and learning. As observed in Sweden, the focus is not on 'quality' but on 'quality work' (Östling, 1997): how an institution satisfies itself that its chosen academic standards are being achieved. While inherently simpler and less expensive to conduct than institutional accreditation reviews or a comprehensive system of subject assessments, audits often have been criticised as a mechanism of accountability because they focus on process rather than the assessment of academic outcomes. Nonetheless, as academic institutions seek the managerial flexibility and capacities they will need to function in the new environment, and as governments come to rely more upon market competition and performance funding as means of academic accountability, there is increasing interest in academic audit and its orientation toward improving academic quality assurance processes within universities. There is a growing realisation that the focus of academic audit on improvement and institutional quality assurance processes may be a more appropriate means of accountability given the evolution of colleges and universities throughout the world into self-regulatory 'learning organizations' (Dill, 1999a).

In sum, the techniques of academic audit offer a number of possible improvements over the existing processes of institutional accreditation and subject assessments for addressing the contemporary challenges of academic quality assurance. However, as a number of countries and agencies have developed academic audits they have confronted problems of implementation. These issues are reflected in changes made over time in the conduct of audits in the UK, New Zealand, Sweden, and Hong Kong, as well as in the experiences of the CRE across Europe [3]. Among these critical issues are the following:

- *the focus of audits*: what processes or areas should be the primary focus of academic audits?
- *the selection and training of audit teams*: what types of individuals make the most effective auditors, and what are the best means of preparing them for their responsibilities?
- *the nature of audit self-studies and/or audit submissions*: academic audits normally involve some type of institutional assessment or audit submission—what information and activities are most useful in preparation for an academic audit?
- *the conduct of audit visits*: audit teams usually have a short period to visit an institution— what type of on-site activities have proved most useful for audit teams?

- *audit reports*: academic audits are always made public—what has been learned about the writing and dissemination of audit reports?
- *audit follow-up and enhancement activities*: how do quality assurance agencies follow up on audit reports, what are the best means of enhancing system knowledge about quality assurance practices, and how are academic audit processes themselves improved?

The sections to follow will review the experiences of the respective agencies with academic audit, identifying the lessons learned in each of the above areas, and suggesting guidelines for the design and implementation of effective audits with particular emphasis on the improvement of teaching and learning.

## Audit Initiation

The Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals in the UK implemented the first academic audits in 1990, but other countries and agencies have adopted versions of the concept over the last decade [4]. Academic audits are now being conducted on an ongoing basis in the UK, Sweden, New Zealand, Hong Kong and by the Association of European Universities (CRE). Each of the audit approaches has in common an institutional focus, an orientation to quality process, as well as a similar procedure for evaluation featuring peer review, an institutional submission, a site visit, and a published report (Table 1). However, other aspects of the audit designs vary. For example, the audits differ in the composition of the audit team, the continuity of the teams in the reviewing process, the length of the audit visit, the means of distributing reports, and follow-up activities.

To some extent these variations reflect the different political or organisational contexts in which the particular audit process was implemented. For example, the initial focus of academic audit in the UK was strongly influenced by persistent concerns in the Thatcher government about the quality of teaching in the university sector. As a consequence the Academic Standards Group of the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) recommended the creation of an Academic Audit Unit (AAU) to provide external and independent assurance that UK universities had adequate and effective mechanisms and structures for monitoring, maintaining, and improving the quality of their teaching. Academic audit in the UK also evolved in a system that had in place a Research Assessment Exercise designed to evaluate the quality of research, and after 1993 a teaching assessment exercise carried out by the Funding Councils, which reviewed the quality of teaching at the subject level. Therefore, academic audit in the UK focused principally upon academic quality processes at the institutional level associated with the provision of programmes of study and the maintenance of academic standards. Finally, with the passage of the *Further and Higher Education Act in 1992*, audits were provided the additional authority of government endorsement.

The creation of the Swedish, New Zealand and Hong Kong processes were similarly a response to pressure from government for greater accountability on academic quality in the university system. In Sweden, the *1993 Higher Education Reform* decentralised the higher education system and as part of the reform directed that all institutions should have quality enhancement programmes. A national Agency for Higher Education was created, which had a number of evaluative responsibilities including the auditing of quality in the universities and university colleges. In New Zealand the *1990 Education Amendment Act* established the NZ Vice Chancellor's Committee as a statutory body with explicit responsibility for standards and qualifications in the university sector. The Act also strongly implied that there should be active monitoring of these standards and qualifications. The

TABLE 1. Basic components of academic audits

| | UK | New Zealand | CRE | Sweden | Hong Kong |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Date Initiated | 1990 | 1994 | 1994 | 1995 | 1995 |
| Number of "Auditable" Institutions | 180 universities, colleges of higher education, and specialist institutions | 7 universities | 500+ universities and equivalent institutions | 36 colleges and universities | 7 institutions (polytechnics, universities, and a college) |
| Makeup of Audit Team | (4)<br>3 UK academics<br>Secretary | (7)<br>2 NZ academics<br>2 Industry/Commerce<br>1 Overseas academic<br>Director AAU<br>Secretary | (4)<br>3 Rectors<br>Secretary | (7)<br>3 Swedish academics<br>1 Industry/ Government<br>1 Student<br>Secretary<br>Project officer | (18)<br>8 UGC<br>8 HK academics<br>2 Overseas academics |
| Team Continuity | Unique team<br>Audit panel | Unique team<br>Audit panel | Unique team<br>Audit panel | Unique team | Intact team |
| Audit Visit | Two visits<br>Second visit 2–4 days, varies by university size | Two visits<br>Second visit 3 days | Two visits<br>Second visit 2.5 days | Two visits<br>Second visit 2–3 days, varies by university size | Two visits<br>Second visit 1.5 days |
| Report Distribution | Sent to institution<br>Available to public<br>Distributed | Sent to institution<br>Available to public<br>Distributed | Sent to institution<br>Publicly distributed by institution | Sent to institution<br>Available to public<br>Distributed<br>Internet | Sent to institution<br>Internet |
| Follow-up | Progress report<br>Quality enhancement<br>Published studies<br>Codes of conduct<br>Evaluation | Voluntary progress report<br>Evaluation | Follow-up visit<br>Published studies<br>Annual surveys<br>University seminars | Feedback visit<br>Published studies | Progress report<br>Teaching workshop<br>Evaluation |

Committee therefore established an Academic Audit Unit to audit the quality processes within the universities.

In Hong Kong the University Grants Committee (UGC) was established in 1965 to advise the government on the academic development and funding of the higher education sector. As the system expanded in size and cost in the 1990s it became the government's and public's expectation that the UGC would take an active role in assuring the quality of higher education provision in the institutions for which it has responsibility. Initially the UGC implemented a Research Assessment Exercise similar to that in the UK. Recognising the clear signal that this assessment sent about the importance of research, the UGC then instituted a process to audit the quality of teaching and learning: Teaching Learning Quality Process Review (TLQPR). Subsequently the UGC has also implemented a systematic process of management reviews.

In contrast to these government inspired developments the CRE (Association of European Universities), a body with an increasingly professional orientation for European university leaders, initiated its programme of Institutional Evaluation in 1993 in response to the sweeping changes affecting European institutions of higher education. In its pilot phase during 1993–1994 the CRE conducted International Quality Audits of three universities, which focused on the institution's strategic management process with a particular attention to the management of quality in the university's activities. Because the CRE is a membership-based organisation aiming at mutual support and learning, institutions have been selected for evaluation on a voluntary basis [5].

*Collegial Development*

Despite these different contexts, all of the academic audits were implemented with a great deal of sensitivity to the authority of the universities. The CRE as well as the audit agencies in the UK, New Zealand and Sweden conducted pilot audits with volunteer universities to test and review the methodology of the audit process. In Sweden, several workshops were held involving university representatives to review the experience with these pilot projects before proceeding further with implementation. In Hong Kong, active discussions were held with the universities on quality assurance alternatives before selection of the TLQPR process, and a 'Consultative Committee' representing the universities was involved in the design phase. The review panel for the TLQPR included one member drawn from each of the eight institutions under the aegis of the UGC, and all representatives served as full members of the panel without restrictions, including the review and deliberation of his or her home institution.

This attention to collegial consultation in implementation is consistent with audit's basic assumption that assuring academic standards and the quality of education must be the corporate responsibility of academic institutions. Developing an active and effective 'culture of quality' on teaching and learning within institutions may, therefore, necessitate changes in academic values and adjustments to academic governance. These changes are unlikely to occur unless faculty members clearly accept their individual and collective responsibility for assuring academic quality, and are willing to consider recommendations for improvement in academic processes. Therefore, successful implementation of academic audit requires a design and development process that actively considers the views of faculty members and develops over time institutional trust in the integrity of the process:

Lesson 1: Academic audit requires a collegial approach to design and development.

*Audit Goals*

While in every system there were early complaints about insufficient clarity of objectives or procedures, there is a general sense that learning through experience is fundamental to implementing academic audit. The specific goals and methods of audit must, to some extent, be discovered through the conduct of the process itself as audit agencies, auditors, and institutions come to better understand what quality assurance processes involve, and what academic audits can and cannot accomplish.

Later audit cycles are clearly better articulated but this is likely because all the involved parties have a clearer understanding of what effective academic quality assurance entails. Audit is a malleable process and, as will be noted below, later audit cycles often take on a more selective focus. In Hong Kong, the audit approach has also been adapted to 'management reviews', designed to improve the management capacity of the higher education institutions (Massy *et al.*, 1999). This learning curve with academic audit appears characteristic of the process and further reinforces the importance of an open, consultative development process, with frequent feedback and evaluation:

> Lesson 2: The objectives and procedures of academic audit tend to be clarified through practical experience with the process over time and this learning curve should be anticipated in the 'design process'.

*Audit Scope*

A fundamental difference among the audit approaches is the scope of processes they address (Table 2). The widest scope is to be found in the audits carried out under the auspices of the CRE. These audits focus on the strategic management process, evaluating how a university changes in order to improve and examining the role that quality management plays in that change. Therefore, the CRE process reviews the institutional mission, institutional policies, strategies and operational procedures, as well as institutional resources, and organisation. To the extent that the CRE audits look at quality it is primarily concerned with the 'quality culture' of the institution and attends to the role that quality management in teaching and learning, research and the provision of services plays in institutional improvement and accountability. As a consequence, the CRE focus is principally at the central administrative level of the institution, although the process does attempt to check whether plans and strategies designed and implemented at the central level are shared, understood, and supported in the units.

In contrast, the Swedish approach borrowed more from the tradition of UK academic audits and focused on evaluating university 'quality enhancement' programmes and their implementation. Therefore, Swedish quality audits examined: institutional strategies for quality implementation; how and to what extent teachers, researchers, administrative personnel and students were committed and involved in quality enhancement programmes ('universal participation in quality enhancement'); the ways external stakeholders had been identified and their needs and demands determined ('cooperation among interested parties'); and methods for evaluating activities with particularly attention to staff and student recruitment and development ('evaluatory and follow-up systems'). Given the government's desire to encourage institutional self-regulation, the Swedish audits placed particular emphasis on the exercise of institutional leadership in quality enhancement programmes and the ways the university pursued national and international contacts for improving professional activities ('external professional relations').

The New Zealand model also closely tracks the UK academic audit process in its

TABLE 2. Scope of academic audits across countries

| CRE | Sweden | New Zealand | UK | Hong Kong |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mission statement<br>Institutional policies<br>Mid-long-term strategies<br>Operational procedures | | | | |
| Resources<br>Development mechanisms<br>Organization structures | External professional relations | | | |
| | Integration | Quality assurance in research, especially in the context of its relationship with university teaching. | | |
| | Evaluatory and follow-up systems | Quality assurance in relation to the appointment and performance of academic staff. | Mechanisms for quality assurance in relation to academic staff: | How are curricula designed, reviewed, and improved? |
| | | Quality assurance in the design, monitoring and evaluation of courses and programs of study for degrees and other qualifications. | Mechanisms for quality assurance in provision and design of courses and degree programs | |
| | | | | How well do faculty members perform their teaching duties? |
| | | Quality assurance in teaching, learning, and assessment. | Mechanisms for quality assurance in teaching and communication methods: | |
| Accountability | Cooperation among interested parties | Taking account of the views in respect of academic matters of students, of external examiners, of professional bodies, and of employers. | Mechanisms for quality assurance in taking account of the views of stakeholders | How staff, departments, schools, and the institutions monitor student outcomes, and link outcome assessments to the improvement of teaching and learning processes? |
| Culture of Quality<br>Quality management<br>Institutional improvement | Leadership<br>Strategy for quality implementation | | | Are the human, technical and financial resources needed for quality made available when and where needed? |
| | Universal participation in quality enhancement | | | |

attention to means of quality assurance in the appointment and development of staff, as well as quality assurance mechanisms in courses and programmes. However, the New Zealand approach adds the additional topic of quality assurance in research with particular regard to its connection with teaching [6]. The audits also included attention to a particular issue of social importance in New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi, which assured certain rights to the indigenous peoples.

UK academic audit in its earliest manifestation focused on university mechanisms for quality assurance in relation to academic staff, in the provision and design of courses and degree programmes, in teaching and communication methods, and in taking account of the views of stakeholders [7].

The Hong Kong TLQPR has the most carefully defined scope of the five processes reviewed, evaluating quality assurance processes in undergraduate or first degree teaching including the means of designing curricula, evaluating teaching, assessing learning outcomes, and providing resources to quality assurance. As previously noted, TLQPR was implemented by the University Grants Committee following the development of a Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which clearly encouraged teaching staff involvement in research among the Hong Kong universities.

There is some evidence from the available evaluations of academic audits (Bauer *et al.*, 1999; Brennan *et al.*, 1999; Coopers & Lybrand, 1993; New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit, 1997; Stensaker, 1999a, b) that those processes with a narrower scope (for example, New Zealand, UK, and Hong Kong) had more influence on improving institutional quality assurance processes related to teaching and learning. A more narrowly focused academic audit concentrates the minds of academics on teaching and learning and helps to place the improvement of student learning on the agenda of universities. Then too, audits focused on teaching and learning processes can better involve academic units, which is where teaching and learning is actually conducted, and where related quality improvements must necessarily be implemented. It is also worth noting (Table 2) that there seems to be an emerging consensus on the focus of an academic audit process designed to improve teaching and learning. The academic audits in New Zealand, the UK and Hong Kong all focused to some degree on processes of quality assurance and improvement related to the curriculum, teaching, the assessment of student achievement/performance/outcomes, and involving the views of various stakeholders other than the faculty (e.g. students, professional bodies, employers) [8]:

> Lesson 3: Audits with a narrower scope, which focus on quality assurance processes associated with curricula, teaching, student outcomes, and the views of stakeholders, have a greater impact on improving the quality of teaching and student learning.

*Process Orientation*

Although audit is distinctive in its focus on process, it appears unwise to assume that academics, whether auditors or audited, have a clear conception of what constitutes academic quality assurance process. In each of the systems, it quickly became apparent that even experienced academics might not have a clear conception of what constitutes academic quality assurance process. There were reports of confusion both among those audited and those conducting the audits as to the difference between academic substance and process, outcomes and process, objectives and process, etc. Auditors and the faculties reviewed both reported that a great deal of learning took place about the nature of

academic quality assurance processes and best practices in higher education. This reality has obvious implications for auditor training and, as will be noted below, for institutional preparation for an academic audit:

> Lesson 4: An orientation toward academic quality assurance processes among members of the academic community cannot be assumed but must be developed.

### Selection and Training of Audit Teams

The audit processes varied in the size, composition, selection and training of audit teams (Table 1). Audit teams can be relatively small (three to four auditors), because auditors are generalists rather than subject specialists and are examining primarily institution-level quality assurance processes. The large size of the Hong Kong TLQPR team reflected the desire for broad institutional representation as well as an audit method that included unit-level visits (see below). There have been discussions following the first round of TLQPR suggesting that the general audit approach could be accomplished with a smaller team and visiting each institution for a somewhat longer period.

With regard composition, all of the teams included senior, experienced faculty members (in the case of the management-oriented CRE process, experienced Rectors). In New Zealand and Hong Kong, overseas academics were included, in Sweden and New Zealand representatives of industry and commerce were included, and in Sweden a student was included as a member of the team. Only in Hong Kong was a representative of the institution being audited included in the team. All of the teams, save Hong Kong, also included a 'secretary', usually an experienced administrator [9]. In Hong Kong, the chair of the team filled this role. Despite the wide variety of team composition, the make-up of the audit teams has generally received little criticism in relevant evaluations. However, the distinctive composition of some teams often reflected national traditions (for example, student membership in Sweden) that may not transfer well to other settings. The most noteworthy comments were concerns expressed in the UK by the 'old' universities that auditors from the former polytechnic sector did not have sufficient understanding of university processes, suggestions in Hong Kong that the institutional representative on the team was less active in questioning and team discussion during the visit to his or her home institution, comments in Sweden that industrial/commercial representatives received little personal benefit from the process (in the form of knowledge gained), and informal observations in a number of systems that university administrators serving as auditors may tend to temper criticisms of the quality assurance processes presided over by their peers.

The selection of auditors varied. With the exception of Hong Kong, which utilised the same team for all reviews composed primarily of members of the University Grants Committee and local institutional representatives, the other audit processes had to recruit auditors for each review. Recruitment was often carried out through the professional contacts and experience of the individual directing the audit process, although institutional nominations and individual applications for auditor were invited in the UK, New Zealand, and Sweden. In the UK the Academic Audit Unit evolved a process of selection in which potential auditors were invited to participate in a day of role-play with audit materials. In this manner, their knowledge of quality assurance processes, understanding of the goals of audit, and skills in working as a member of a team could be assessed prior to their actual selection as an auditor. Of particular concern to the AAU was weeding out 'quality

ideologues', those who felt that there was 'one best way' to assure academic quality assurance.

The CRE, New Zealand, Sweden and UK all used unique teams of auditors, constructed for each audit visit. All but Sweden also created a 'bank' of trained auditors, individuals appointed for a period of time, who were then used for a number of different audits as a means of improving audit reliability. Hong Kong, by contrast, utilised an intact team over the course of a year for all its institutional audits as a means of enhancing auditor learning and the reliability of the process. The relatively small size of the Hong Kong system (seven institutions at the time of the audits) made this a feasible approach. The employment of an intact team enabled the audit process to begin more quickly, with both the auditors and the institutions learning about the process as it evolved.

The CRE, UK, New Zealand, and Sweden also developed auditor training in which members of audit teams were given an opportunity to read and critique pilot audit reports, interview those involved in previous audits, and develop skills in questioning. Sweden, New Zealand and the UK developed audit protocols to help guide auditors in their visits. Audit guides including these protocols were made publicly available better to inform institutions about how audits would be conducted. The openness of this process underscores the emphasis on development and improvement as a goal for the audit process:

> Lesson 5: The focus of academic audit on quality assurance processes in teaching and learning requires experienced academics as a core for an auditing team; the unique orientation of audits requires careful selection of auditors, auditor training, and audit protocols that can provide guidance for the reviews.

## Audit Submissions

All of the audit processes involve a submission by the institutions being audited. The framework for the submission among the different audit processes varied and tended to evolve over time. The CRE, for example, asks for a self-study, which follows an explicit format, although changes in the format have occurred. The New Zealand process also requires a self-study and provided a framework at the outset, which remained stable through the first cycle of the reviews. By contrast, the original audit process in the UK did not request a self-assessment, but initially requested the institution submit as 'briefing documents' examples of the types of documents it typically used internally to assure the quality of teaching and learning. Over time the AAU developed a checklist of the type of materials to be submitted, including university catalogues, annual reports, and most importantly, a concise summary of the quality assurance arrangements at all levels across the institution. The checklist also requested an analysis of how these quality assurance arrangements were seen to be working and any proposed changes. Similarly the first cycles of audits in Sweden and Hong Kong, while suggesting some general guidelines, attempted to avoid being overly prescriptive about the audit submissions as a means of encouraging institutional diversity.

These more open-ended approaches produced a cascade of documents that almost drowned the audit teams. Institutions submitted countless programme documents, manuals and other materials, many of which the auditors found to be of little relevance. Following an initial meeting in which these documents were reviewed, audit teams commonly had to make requests to the institutions for additional or clarifying documents, a process which the institutions often found burdensome. The audit teams frequently discovered, following their institutional visits, that the larger the submission the less clear

the quality assurance processes at the institutions being reviewed. The CRE and the UGC in Hong Kong attempted to lessen the volume of materials by placing some limits on the amount of text to be submitted (20–30 pages) and requesting that institutions examine their current quality assurance processes, analysing their strengths and weaknesses. Reviews of the audit process in Sweden, which has been most committed to encouraging institutional diversity in the audit process, concluded that 'reflective assessments' of quality assurance processes by the audited institutions were likely to be most effective both for the institutions and for the teams conducting the audit (Niklasson, 1997). In the UK, the QAA has requested that institutions participating in the second round of audits, now called Continuation Audit, submit an analytical account of 30–40 pages, which addresses a recommended outline of topics:

> Lesson 6: Academic audits represent a new and often unique perspective for an external review; therefore, an emphasis on a concise, 'reflective' account of quality assurance processes rather than a call for all relevant documents or a formal self-study may be a more effective use of institutional time in an initial audit cycle.

While the process of an academic audit is primarily an institutional-level mechanism for quality assurance and improvement, the effectiveness of institutional-level processes is ultimately determined by their impact on quality processes at the level of the academic unit or department. Evaluations of the audit processes in both Sweden and Hong Kong revealed that institutional submissions that formally involved academic units helped foster department-level discussions and debates about academic quality assurance and the improvement of teaching and learning (Stensaker, 1999b). In Hong Kong, administrators noted that the departmental reports on quality assurance activities revealed for the first time the variations in processes that existed among departments. This information facilitated discussion of the need for institution-level processes as well as helped identify examples of good practice that could be shared across an institution. While in Sweden the inclusion of unit reports was a decision made by each institution, in Hong Kong, the design of the TLQPRs, which included visits to a sample of academic units, led to reports on quality assurance being developed by all academic units in the audited institutions:

> Lesson 7: Institutional submissions that require reports from each academic unit have the added benefit of stimulating discussion and debate on quality assurance in teaching and learning throughout the entire university.

**Audit Visits**

As noted at several different points in this discussion, despite the easy familiarity among members of the academic community with the topic of academic quality, a peer review of quality assurance processes is a new experience for most academics. In addition, the process may arouse concerns about issues of academic freedom and academic authority. For this reason, among others, each of the agencies conducting academic audits included preparatory meetings with the institution to be audited at which the audit team and/or representatives of the audit agency could introduce and answer questions about the goals and process of the review. The CRE Institutional Review Process involves an initial visit of several days in which the team becomes familiar with the university and carries out a number of preliminary interviews in preparation for the second visit:

> Lesson 8: Preparatory visits to the institution by the audit team are valuable,

particularly in the first cycle of audits, for introducing the academic community
to the audit process and gaining acceptance of the audit approach.

Prior to the final review visit, audit teams in the UK, Hong Kong, Sweden, the CRE, and
New Zealand would meet to review the submissions from the institutions to be audited.
These sessions were viewed as important for identifying critical issues to be pursued
during the visit, determining the responsibilities of the team members, constructing the
specific agenda for the visit, and if necessary identifying supplementary materials to be
requested from the institution.

The formal visit of the audit team ranged between 1.5 days in Hong Kong and 4 days
in the UK. While Hong Kong used the same amount of time for each institution regardless
of mission or size, audit visits in Sweden and the UK are longer for larger institutions. The
format of the visits is similar to those in other accreditation or programme reviews: a
plenary session with institutional administrators, smaller group meetings with faculty
members, students and other key constituencies, a closing plenary session with institu-
tional administrators in which preliminary findings may be presented.

A potential danger in the visit is that auditors will be tempted try to assess academic
performance or the academic substance of an institution rather than focusing on the
effectiveness of its underlying quality assurance processes. Auditor questions and eventual
reports that stray into these areas may thus undermine the integrity of the audit process.
This is another reason for developing training processes for auditors and audit protocols
that can help to assure the validity of the audit inquiries and the resulting reports.

In his evaluation of impacts of the Swedish audit process Stensaker (1999b) noted that
the traditional debate in academic auditing is about the appropriate balance between
accountability and improvement. However, he suggests that the more relevant debate is
how to design an audit process that attends to quality assurance work at both the
institutional level and at the level of the basic unit. As Stensaker suggests the development
of a true 'quality culture' within a university, in which there is a pervasive concern with
the improvement of teaching and learning, will require an effective interaction on quality
assurance between different levels of an institution. The audit approaches in the UK and
Hong Kong come closest to addressing this dilemma. In the UK a distinctive feature of an
audit visit is the following of 'audit trails' in which a particular issue such as a new
curriculum approval is followed through different levels of an institution in order to
explore the effectiveness of the relevant process. In Hong Kong, the TLQPR team, after
reviewing the institution-level quality assurance processes, divides into sub-groups who
visit up to 12 academic units selected by the team for discussions with faculty members
and students about the quality assurance of teaching and learning. Both of these ap-
proaches would appear to be more effective than institution-level audits alone in evaluat-
ing the effectiveness of an institution's quality assurance and improvement processes for
teaching and student learning:

> Lesson 9: Audit visits need to objectively assess quality assurance processes,
> particularly the interaction between quality assurance practices and behaviours at
> the level of the academic unit and quality assurance policies and procedures at the
> institution level.

## Audit Reports

In each case the audit team produced an audit report for the institution. In Hong Kong,
New Zealand, Sweden, and the UK there is a clear expectation that the report will be made

public, although the process of publication differs. In the first cycle in New Zealand, and in the first year of academic audit under the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals in the UK, publication was the only means of achieving public accountability for universities' quality assurance processes. This was not the case in Sweden, or Hong Kong, nor in the UK when audit was moved under the HEQC by government mandate. Nonetheless, publication of audit reports has been perceived to be an important dimension of accountability in all systems, and the evidence from audit evaluations suggests that publication motivates the institutions to take the process more seriously (Brennan *et al.*, 1999; Coopers & Lybrand, 1993; Massy & French, 1999; New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit, 1997):

> Lesson 10: The publication of academic audit reports appears to be an important element in their ability to influence academic behaviour.

The compilation of the reports was not unlike that for other evaluation processes in higher education: members of the team were asked to draft a segment of the report; the audit chair or a designated member usually coordinated development of the report (in Sweden the Audit Secretary prepared a draft of the report); a final draft was circulated to the institution for correction of facts. As clear communication of the results was deemed critical to the audit process, staff members in the UK and Swedish audit agencies would sometimes edit or rewrite the reports. In the UK the AAU took the position that the auditors 'owned' their judgements but the AAU 'owned' the text of the reports.

The UK, New Zealand, and Hong Kong reports followed a similar format throughout the entire audit cycle, although all of the agencies made some modifications and improvements in the content of their reports based upon experience (Table 3). The Swedish audit reports, reflecting the national concern with institutional diversity were less systematically structured.

The public nature of the reports generated special concerns regarding style and content among the audit agencies. The reports in the UK were widely regarded as employing a 'veiled' form of language, consciously listing 'practices worthy of commendation', 'suggestions for improvement', and 'mechanisms for consideration', but pointedly avoiding 'recommendations'. Similarly, the academic audit reports in New Zealand purposely placed recommendations in the body of the report, to require the press and public to read the entire document in order to discover any criticisms. This defensive style has become somewhat less necessary over time as trust developed between the institutions and the agencies. In a number of the evaluations of academic audit (Coopers & Lybrand, 1993; New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit, 1997) institutions complained that the reports were often too vague and lacked specific recommendations!

On the other hand, the evaluations also stress the need for the audit reports to be based on demonstrable evidence rather than hearsay. In Hong Kong, some audit reports were also criticised for straying away from the TLQPR focus on 'process' and introducing substantive educational debates or issues (Brennan *et al.*, 1999). These points suggest that academic audit reports need to be written with particular care and objectivity, although the validity of the observations and the reliability of the method across institutions may be more crucial to the success of audits than the particular style of language employed.

A final issue of report content relates to 'best practice'. The understandable desire among audit agencies not to impose a quality assurance template on institutions conflicts with the reality that auditors are likely to discover 'good' or 'best' practices in the course of their work (Coopers & Lybrand, 1993). How should this issue be addressed within the reports? One approach is clearly to commend institutions for processes that

TABLE 3. Format of academic audit reports

| CRE | Sweden | New Zealand | UK | Hong Kong |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A. Constraints and institutional norms in terms of resources, development, quality, and organization<br>B. The capacity for change in mission institutional policies, mid-and long-term strategies, and the operation of change<br>C. Review Summary: recommendations for action in academic leadership, quality assurance strategies, and managerial capacity. | 1. Summary description with general observations concerning university/college and its quality program<br>2. Presentation of audit team's approach and choices, and the reason for their choices<br>3. Detailed review of the strengths and weaknesses of the various areas investigated and the reference areas.<br>4. Audit teams' suggestions and recommendations concerning improvement of the quality program and its further development. | A. Overview and summary: nature and effectiveness of institution's quality assurance mechanisms; identified areas of strengths and weaknesses<br>B. Mission, objectives and quality assurance: mission; how objectives determine planned activities; nature and application of quality assurance mechanisms<br>C. Mechanisms for quality assurance: their effectiveness; how the institution judges this; how the institution judges the quality of its outcomes<br>D. Institutional self-assessment: assessment of institution's portfolio; perceptiveness of institution's self-assessment; institution's priorities for improvement/development. | University context<br>The audit process<br>University's aims and Objectives<br>Outline of quality Assurance structures<br>Quality assurance in design and Review of programs of study<br>Quality assurance in teaching, learning and the student experience<br>Quality assurance and academic staff<br>Quality assurance in assessment and degree classification procedures<br>Verification and feedback processes<br>Audit of promotional materials<br>Conclusion and points for further consideration | Introduction<br>Review process<br>Institutional self-assessment<br>Curriculum design<br>Pedagogical design<br>Implementation quality<br>Outcomes assessment<br>Resource provision<br>Unit-level observations<br>Areas for improvement |

appear particularly innovative and effective. Another, as discussed in the next section, is to cull audit reports for examples of 'good practice' and to disseminate those discoveries through a separate quality enhancement process. While academic auditors will likely do a great deal of 'teaching' about the nature of quality assurance processes in the course of their audits, the combination of auditing and enhancement activities within the same process may lead to misinterpretation by the institutions being audited.

The timing of the release of the report is also a consideration in the design of the audit approach. In the UK, reports were not released to the public until 3 months after the institution received it. In New Zealand, a shorter period of grace was provided. In Sweden, the publication of the report coincides with a meeting between the Chancellor of the Swedish Universities and University Colleges, the chair of the audit team, and the institutional management at which they discuss what actions should be taken in response to the audit. This meeting also involves an evaluation of the auditing process itself.

The publication of the reports in Sweden, the UK, and New Zealand is similar. Reports are sent to the audited institution, as well as to other relevant organisations, individuals and government agencies. In both the UK and Sweden audit reports are now posted on the agency's website. In New Zealand, the Audit Agency prepares a press release with the publication of each audit report. In Hong Kong, the reports are sent to the institutions who are asked to post the report on their website together with a statement of response if they so wish, whereupon a link to the report and the institution's response is included in the UGC's own website.

## Audit Follow-up and Quality Enhancement

The academic audit process does not conclude with the publication of the audit report (Table 1). Audit follow-up activities include: ongoing discussions and contacts between quality assurance agencies and institutions; quality enhancement activities in the form of quality assurance workshops and meetings among university faculty and administrators; evaluation and research studies prompted by common issues and problems identified through the audit process; and developmental activities designed to disseminate best practice in academic quality assurance.

All of the agencies involved in audit took specific steps to follow up on the audit reports themselves. In both the UK and New Zealand, progress reports were initially left as voluntary components of the process. Eventually, however, a progress report reflecting the institution's response to the findings of the audit report became a formal part of the process. In Hong Kong, each institution was expected to develop and submit to the University Grants Committee, approximately 2 years after the review, a progress report indicating the steps it had taken in response to the TLQPR. In Sweden, the Chancellor of the Swedish Universities and University Colleges, which conducted the audits, met with each institution after a year as part of a 'follow-up' at which developments at each institution since the audit report were discussed. The CRE as a professional organisation with voluntary reviews did not formally require a progress report until recently, but encouraged interested institutions to submit one. In the future, the CRE will require a progress report, proposing a written response from the review team as an incentive. The CRE has also implemented follow-up visits to reviewed institutions 2 years after the original review. Each year the CRE also holds university seminars in which those universities that had undergone the review can speak with other institutions and share what they had learned.

The nature of academic audit also lends itself to collective quality enhancement activi-

ties. First, the focus on process helps to reveal good practices that can be usefully disseminated to the institutions. The CRE regularly publishes a report for its members on insights into strategic management and quality improvements gleaned from its institutional reviews. The Consultative Committee in Hong Kong, which was formed as part of the TLQPR process, offered a workshop on new methods of teaching as a follow-up to the TLQPR process. The HEQC in the UK set up a separate quality enhancement division, which helped establish and support a practitioner network, to exchange good practices among institutions. The unit also regularly analysed audit reports and published two *Learning from Audit* reports (HEQC, 1994, 1996) summarising insights on academic quality assurance derived from the first round of academic audit. Subsequent publications have included various guidelines on good practice, codes of conduct in quality assurance, and developments in academic standards and quality nationally and internationally.

Second, audits of a number of institutions helped reveal shared weaknesses or instances of a shared lack of knowledge. One prominent example of this in the UK were consistently observed problems with the external examiner system caused in part by institutional neglect as well as by changes in the nature of teaching and student assessment. As a consequence a substantial amount of study and developmental work was carried out by the HEQC to recommend policies and improvements in the external examining system. In this way, the information from academic audit can be used to inform investments in large-scale studies and developmental efforts that will help expand practical knowledge about quality assurance approaches in higher education.

Third, the audit process produces a knowledgeable and committed group of academics, the auditors, who develop an informal communication network for knowledge and information on academic quality assurance both within their home institutions and across institutions. The development of this informal network over time can be an important instrument for disseminating good practice and stimulating improvement in teaching and learning at every level of higher education:

> Lesson 11: Academic audit's focus on improvement lends itself to quality enhancement activities that can develop greater understanding about academic quality assurance throughout the higher education system and support the dissemination of 'good practice'.

In addition to the follow-up and quality enhancement activities, several types of evaluation were conducted of the audit process itself. Both the CRE and the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education conducted surveys of the audited institutions and of the relevant audit team as a means of assessing the effectiveness of the audit process (Kanaan, 1997, 1999; Nilsson & Wahlen, 1999; Wahlen, 1997). All of the agencies conducting academic audit have completed or are contemplating an external review of the entire academic audit process (Brennan *et al.*, 1999; Coopers & Lybrand, 1993; New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit, 1997; Stensaker, 1999a, b). This type of external evaluation of academic audit, investigating its impacts and providing suggestions for improvement, is crucial for emphasising that any quality assurance process can be improved through objective and independent review (Harvey, 1999). The openness of auditing agencies to objective evaluation is a necessary step if the audit process is to achieve the respect of the academic institutions:

> Lesson 12: An external evaluation of the academic audit process itself is both a

useful means of improvement and a valuable signal to the academic community as to the integrity of the process-oriented approach.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from the experience with academic audits in Europe and Asia is the accumulating evidence of its impact on systems of higher education (Bauer *et al.*, 1999; Brennan *et al.*, 1999; Coopers & Lybrand, 1993; Massy & French, 1999; New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit, 1997; Nilsson & Wahlen, 1999; Stensaker, 1999b). In every case the implementation of academic audit has acted as a catalyst for change. Academic audits have:

- helped initiate or bolster development of quality assurance systems within institutions;
- placed attention to improving teaching and student learning on institutional agendas;
- helped to clarify responsibility for improving teaching and student learning at the individual, academic unit, faculty, and institutional level;
- reinforced institutional leaders in their efforts to develop institution-wide 'quality cultures';
- facilitated discussion, cooperation, and development within academic units with regard to means for improving teaching and student learning;
- provided system-wide information on best practices and common problem areas; and
- offered visible confirmation to the public that attention is being paid to academic quality assurance.

Academic audit also offers the possibility for future improvements in student learning but, because such educational benefits are distant, uncertain, and difficult to measure, policymakers often have problems justifying and supporting process-oriented initiatives such as academic audit over time. This issue was raised in a number of the external evaluations of academic audits (Coopers & Lybrand, 1993; Nilsson & Wahlen, 1999; University Grants Committee, 1997). That is, the logic of academic audits relies upon an underlying but difficult-to-prove assumption—that an improvement in quality assurance processes will eventually lead to an improvement in academic outcomes. Understandably, academics and policy makers sought evidence confirming that such a relationship actually existed, evidence that academic audits with their focus on process could not easily provide.

However, as academic audit matures, the reviews are responding to this criticism by focusing more sharply on the measures of learning outcomes currently employed by academic institutions and the role such measures play in quality assurance and improvement processes. In the second cycle of academic audit in the UK, Continuation Audit teams are pursuing the following question as a primary means of evaluating how effectively institutions are discharging their responsibilities for the academic standards and quality of their programmes and awards (QAA, 1998): 'Can you convince us that the evidence that you are relying on for this purpose is sufficient, valid and reliable?'. In both New Zealand (New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit, 1997) and Hong Kong (Massy & French, 1999) it has been proposed that the second cycle of academic audit (TLQPR) focus more on the outcomes of the quality assurance processes being audited by asking how the institutions themselves measure such outcomes. In the US, the recently designed programme accreditation process being implemented by the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC, 1998) will require that each programme to be accredited submit an 'Inquiry Brief' that demonstrates and documents evidence: (a) about its stu-

dents' learning and understanding of the curriculum: (b) that assessments of student learning are valid; and (c) that the programme's quality assurance system yields information that leads to programme improvement.

The new global economy is profoundly affecting higher education as it has other aspects of our lives. The knowledge and skills that students gain from attending colleges and universities have become much more valuable, both to the individual and to society, thereby increasing the importance of obtaining a higher education degree and of participating in an educational programme that leads to tangible gains in student learning. In this new context, both government and higher education organisations have found that the traditional system of academic quality assurance is inadequate. Colleges and universities seek external quality assurance processes that add value and are not unduly burdensome, while the government wishes to be assured that academic institutions maintain and improve academic standards and give appropriate weight to measures of student learning.

It is conceivable that over time a quality assurance system based largely upon the precepts of the competitive market may prove feasible (Dill, 1997). In this type of system government policies would emphasise providing information to the public on the academic performance of institutions, linking public funding of higher education to measures of learning outcomes, and deregulating higher education to assure significant competition among education providers. It is possible that such a combination of policies would be at least as effective as more expensive forms of academic quality regulation now being pursued. Possible, but not guaranteed. The transition to such a 'perfect academic market' will take time, and it is likely that while some institutions would make the necessary internal adaptations to compete effectively in such an environment, many might not.

At a minimum an academic quality assurance system that helps to build the capacity of academic institutions to maintain academic standards and improve the quality of teaching and student learning in the new competitive context appears to be needed and in the public interest. Such an approach would also be an appropriate and responsible means of transition from our traditional system of academic quality assurance, based to a large extent on informal norms and *laissez-faire* institutional quality assurance practices, to a more market-based system relying on strong institutional quality controls. Academic audits as implemented in a number of European and Asian countries offer a valuable model for this suggested 'capacity building' approach to academic quality assurance. By clarifying each institution's corporate responsibility for assuring and improving the quality of teaching and student learning, by focusing institutional attention on the academic processes by which academic standards can be maintained and academic programmes improved and by encouraging the dissemination of information on best practices in academic quality assurance, academic audit appears be a particularly appropriate approach to academic accountability in the new environment of higher education.

# Notes

[1] Some US states have comprehensive programme review processes, which have many similarities to subject assessments. Other US states and a number of countries rely upon a quality assurance system that utilises professional accreditation reviews of programmes and/or evaluations of selected subject fields. Each of these programme-oriented evaluations suffers from similar weaknesses as subject assessments (Wergin, 1998).

[2] Similar concerns have been voiced by institutional leaders about the inflexibility of state programme/degree approval processes in continental Europe and in a number of the US states (see, for example, Epper, 1999).

[3] This analysis is based upon interviews and correspondence with administrators in the various audit agencies as well as participation in an external evaluation of the Hong Kong TLQPR programme (Brennan *et al.*, 1999). In addition, the following sources were utilised: CRE (Barblan, 1996; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1996); Hong Kong (Massy, 1997; Massy & French, 1997; UGC, 1997); New Zealand (Woodhouse, 1995a,b); Sweden (National Agency for Higher Education, 1996; Östling, 1997); United Kingdom (Williams, 1992). Australia and Finland have also utilised an audit-like process in their respective quality assurance programmes, but they are not analysed here. For a comparison of the Australian process with the audits utilised in other countries, see National Agency for Higher Education (1997).

[4] An early advocate of the term 'educational auditing' in the US was Fred Harcleroad, who suggested a model for reforming US institutional and professional accreditation that was drawn from the financial auditing system developed over time by the Securities and Exchange Commission (Harcleroad, 1976).

[5] The CRE programme is now called the Institutional Evaluation Programme. Several of the audit programmes have altered their titles, but retained their basic orientation. UK Academic Audit became Academic Quality Audit under the HEQC, Continuation Audit in its second cycle, and will be named Institutional Review as of 2001. In Hong Kong the term audit was initially proposed then dropped in favour of Teaching Learning Quality Process Review. It is possible that the term 'audit' conveys negative business connotations in some academic settings, although the term continues to be used in Sweden and New Zealand.

[6] For a discussion of the auditing of the 'research/teaching nexus' in New Zealand, see Woodhouse (1998).

[7] Since its inception, UK Academic Audit has undergone a number of revisions. This analysis focuses on academic audit in its first cycle, initially under the CVCP Academic Audit Unit and then under the HEQC.

[8] Academic leadership, particularly the willingness of academic leaders at every level to accept as part of their responsibility the active development of quality assurance and improvement processes for teaching and student learning, has also emerged as an important dimension in Sweden (Nilsson & Wahlen, 1999; Stensaker, 1999a,b) and Hong Kong (Massy & French, 1999).

[9] The inclusion of an audit secretary has been recommended for the next round of TLQPRs in Hong Kong.

[10] In Sweden the institutions have the right to veto individuals selected for audit teams under certain conditions (Wahlen, 1997).

[11] For a thoughtful exploration of the relationship between academic freedom and the collective professional responsibility for teaching and learning in the US context, see Rosvosky and Ameer (1998).

[12] UK Academic Audit has specifically resisted presenting preliminary findings at the conclusion of the visit to avoid misleading the institution and compromising the final report. The problem of conflicting signals being sent by preliminary verbal reports and final reports has been raised in several independent evaluations of audit processes.

[13] Although not specified in the audit instructions, the majority of Swedish institutions audited requested unit self-evaluations as part of the audit process (Östling, 1997). These audit reports were in turn reviewed by the external audit team.

[14] Because of the totally voluntary relationship between the CRE and its members, the CRE's institutional review reports are 'owned' by the relevant institution, which also decides on the report's publication. Nonetheless, a large number of the CRE reports have been made public.

[15] This style was adopted in part because the UK reports had to be able to withstand legal challenge.

[16] A strong case can be made that an important contributor to poor student learning in higher education is the increasingly individualistic behaviour by faculty members in the design and delivery of

instruction. Conversely, an effective means of fostering faculty cooperative activity in the design and implementation of instruction would be to require each academic programme to provide a tangible, summative measure of student learning (Dill, 1999b).

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