Australia's Higher Education Quality Framework
– Components and Current Challenges

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1. Abstract

Australia's current approach to quality assurance in Higher Education (essentially universities and private providers of university-level programs) has evolved over the past ten years. The essential components are: the Australian Qualifications Framework, the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes, State and Territory accreditation and registration, internal self-monitoring and review and external quality audits. In particular, this paper outlines both the contributions of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), and the challenges this body faces in contributing to the development of a quality assured system of Australian Higher Education.

2. Introduction

Australia's higher education system comprises 37 publicly funded universities, two private universities and some 150 higher education providers (HEP) in the form of private colleges and some other public or private institutions. Australia has a population of some 22 million and is divided into six states and two territories each with their own governments and an Australian Federal Government.

Area	7,686,850 sq. km.
Population (2007)	21,272,507 million
Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (purchasing power parity)	$766.8 billion
Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (official exchange rate):	$889.7 billion
Education Budget (2007 – 2008)	$16.4 billion
Higher Education Budget (2007 – 2008)	$6.7 billion

Table 1: Statistical data on Australia
Source: Australian government[1]

Australia's total student population in higher education in 2007 was 1,029,846 persons or 725,892 Equivalent Full-time Student Load. This can be broken down as follows:
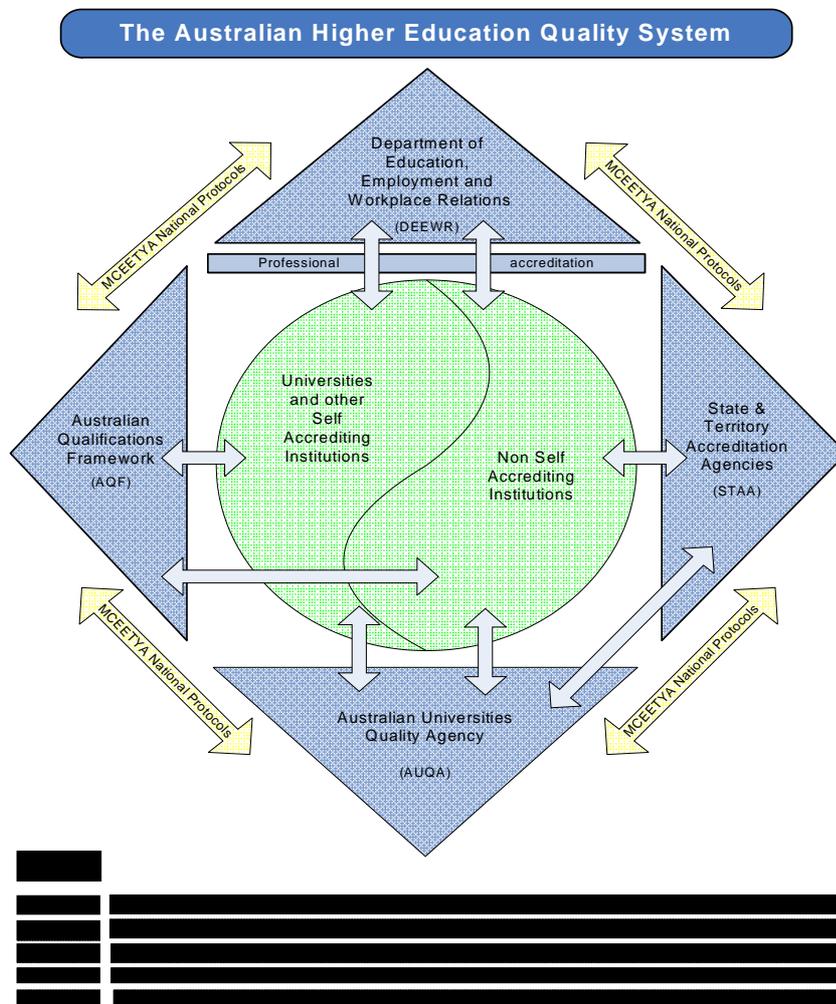
	Student enrolment 2007 Persons	Equivalent full time student load 2007 (EFTSL)
Undergraduate	720,003	563,064
Postgraduate	278,257	149,325

Enabling courses	8,771	4,823
Non-award	22,815	8,683
Domestic	756,747	529,016
International	273,099	196,876
Male	463,452	
Female	566,394	
Full time	700,007	
Part time	329,839	

Table 2: Student Statistical Data

Source: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations[2]

3. The Australian Quality Assurance Framework

The Australian Higher Education Quality System

Department of
Education,
Employment and
Workplace Relations
(DEEWR)

Professional   accreditation

Universities
and other
Self
Accrediting
Institutions

Non Self
Accrediting
Institutions

Australian
Qualifications
Framework
(AQF)

State &
Territory
Accreditation
Agencies
(STAA)

Australian Universities
Quality Agency
(AUQA)

MCEETYA National Protocols

MCEETYA National Protocols

MCEETYA National Protocols

MCEETYA National Protocols

The Australian quality assurance (QA) framework for higher education is made up of six key components and responsibility for these activities is shared between governments

(State and Territory governments and the Federal Government)[3], higher education providers, an independent quality audit agency (the Australian Universities Quality Agency, AUQA), and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Council.[4] All components of this framework are overseen by the Ministerial Council of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) comprising the relevant ministers from the Australian Government, the six States and two Territories of Australia.[5]

The main quality assurance components are:

Accreditation and approval regulates entry to the system. The *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes* (October 2007)[6] regulate who can offer higher education awards and ensure consistent criteria and minimum entry standards in the recognition of higher education providers. Institutions other than universities are required to go through a process of institutional registration and their academic programs are accredited by the relevant government. Universities are established and governed by state and territory legislation, apart from one public university, the Australian National University, which operates under federal legislation.

The Australian Qualifications Framework (or AQF)[7] developed under instruction from State, Territory and Australian Education and Training Ministers meeting as the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. It was introduced Australia-wide on 1 January 1995 and was fully implemented by the year 2000. The framework covers the range of education from certificates at secondary level, bachelor degrees and up to doctoral qualifications. The framework is a highly visible, quality-assured national system of educational recognition which promotes lifelong learning and a seamless and diverse education and training system. Although there is some criticism of it, it is a descriptive or template framework, which appears to be much more helpful and supportive of institutional diversity than the prescriptive or pigeon-hole frameworks in use in some other countries. The Framework is currently under review.[8]

Institutional (internal) self-monitoring and review is expected of all higher education providers. Recognising the principle that quality assurance is the primary responsibility of an institution, each institution is expected to develop and implement its own internal quality assurance system.

External monitoring and review is undertaken by all jurisdictions in Australia (state and territory):

- **State and Territory Governments** require annual reports from all higher education providers. For non-universities this involves a process of re-

registration after demonstration of ongoing compliance with the National Protocols.

- **The Australian Government** through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)[9] provides public funding to Australian universities and oversees a range of quality and accountability requirements. DEEWR produces an annual overarching confidential assessment for each institution in a document called the *Institution Assessment Framework Portfolio.*[10] The document summarises institutional achievements using quantitative and qualitative data received from universities and other sources. This assessment of an institution forms the starting point of strategic and funding bilateral discussions between the DEEWR and an individual institution.

External institutional audit of universities and higher education providers are carried out by the **Australian Universities Quality Agency** (AUQA).[11] AUQA also audits the state and territory based accreditation agencies whose role is to accredit programs and to register institutions. AUQA was created in 2001 as an independent not-for-profit company, to be the principal national quality assurance agency in higher education in Australia.

Other contributions to the QA framework in Australia are the accreditation of professional programs by the relevant **professional organizations** (such as the Australian Medical Council, the state Nursing Boards, the Institution of Engineers Australia, the Accounting bodies). Further, bodies such as the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) contribute through the funding and management of specific teaching and learning projects. Finally, a range of **public information[12]** about Australia's higher education contributes to enabling students and employers to make informed decisions.

Overall, approaches to QA in higher education are maturing, and currently the various partners in the system are facing a range of challenges. These challenges include:

- managing the expectations of stakeholders and involving the sector in the development of clear pronouncements of academic standards across universities and disciplines;
- consideration of how best to assess and measure the quality and impact of research;
- managing the tensions between accreditation and quality audit and evaluation; and achieving the right balance of accountability measures.

A review of Higher Education, commissioned by a new Federal Government is presently attempting to grapple with many of these issues in addition to consideration of institutional funding compacts; teaching only universities; and equity, to ensure that the

future of the higher education sector underpins and sustains the development of an innovative Australian economy.

4. The role of AUQA in building a sustainable Australian Quality Assurance System

This section considers the role and contribution of AUQA in the Australian quality assurance framework.

Central to the rationale for the establishment of AUQA was the concern by the Australian government in the late 1990's that Australia needed some national quality agency to externally validate higher education quality assurance processes and signal to other countries that rigorous quality assurance processes are in place.

> "Our major competitors have external quality assurance mechanisms and countries in our largest markets look to Government verification of quality standards. … there is no external review of the quality assurance processes … we need a system that … signals to the community and the rest of the world that the quality of the higher education system is assured through a rigorous external audit of university quality assurance processes. … Review teams will be appointed by the Agency to focus on the appropriateness of quality assurance and improvement plans in relation to institutional contexts and missions … "[13]
> (Kemp, 1999)

Consequently,
> AUQA was established to be the principal national quality assurance agency in higher education, with responsibility for quality audits of higher education institutions and accreditation authorities, reporting on performance and outcomes, assisting in quality enhancement, advising on quality assurance; and liaising internationally with quality agencies in other jurisdictions, for the benefit of Australian higher education. [14]

A recent review of AUQA resulted in a further refinement of AUQA's objectives:
1. Arrange and manage a system of periodic audits of:
   - the quality of the academic activities, including attainment of standards of performance and outcomes of Australian universities and other higher education institutions;
   - the quality assurance arrangements intended to maintain and elevate that quality;
   - compliance with criteria set out in the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes;

   and monitor, review, analyse and provide public reports on the quality of outcomes in Australian universities and higher education institutions.
2. Arrange and manage a system of periodic audits of the quality assurance processes, procedures, and outcomes of State, Territory and Commonwealth higher education accreditation authorities including their impact on the

quality of higher education programs; and monitor, review, analyse and report on the outcomes of those audits.

3. Publicly report periodically on matters relating to quality assurance, including the relative standards and outcomes of the Australian higher education system and its institutions, its processes and its international standing, and the impact of the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes on Australian Higher Education, using information available to AUQA from its audits and other activities carried out under these Objectives, and from other sources.

4. Develop partnerships with other quality agencies in relation to matters directly relating to quality assurance and audit, to facilitate efficient cross-border quality assurance processes and the international transfer of knowledge about those processes.[15]

AUQA built on good practice from around the world to create a customised quality assurance system. The core of AUQA's approach to institutional audits is a documented institutional self-review followed by an independent external validation and report. AUQA's audits focus on fitness-for-purpose, compliance with the institution's own objectives, adherence to a quality system of approach (planning), deployment (implementation), results and improvement.[16]

During the period 2002-2007 all Australian universities, some self-accrediting institutions and all state/territory accrediting agencies were audited during what is now referred to as Cycle 1 audits of institutions and agencies.[17]

Characteristic features of AUQA's approach currently includes:
- A peer review process.
- A five-member audit panel comprising two senior academics from Australia's higher education sector, an overseas member from a university, one panel member from outside academia to include another perspective and an Audit Director with specific QA expertise from AUQA.
- Visits and an interview program at the institution's main campuses in Australia.
- Visits to and interviews at overseas campuses and partnerships in transnational education.
- Publication of audit reports and subsequent reports of progress in addressing the findings.

Good practices incorporated into the audit approach include:

- international members of audit panels. This brings an international perspective to the audit judgements, and shows the willingness of Australia to open its institutions and their quality systems to international scrutiny;

- audit panel members from outside academia. This brings another perspective, and openness to another group of stakeholders;
- a senior AUQA staff member is a member of each panel. This brings specific QA expertise and aids inter-panel consistency;
- two-day training of on-shore auditors and half-day briefing of overseas auditors;
- visits to overseas campuses and partnerships, and to domestic partnerships, as part of each audit;
- close liaison with overseas quality agencies to ensure that all the auditee's operations are subject to external scrutiny, but without conflicting requirements and with minimal duplication;
- 'affirmations', in addition to commendations and recommendations, in AUQA audit reports to recognise matters already discovered by the auditee in its own self-review;
- detailed feedback from auditees after each audit; and
- publication of audit reports and subsequent reports of the auditees' progress in addressing the affirmations and other recommendations in audit reports.

The second round of university audits, or Cycle 2 audits, commenced in 2008 and represents a more focused approach to audits of institutions. The audit is based on two broad topics or themes, such as internationalization, the student experience, research and research training, workforce planning for teaching and research. A particular emphasis of Cycle 2 audits is consideration of institutional transnational (or offshore) education activities, such as operating a campus at overseas locations or providing an Australian degree through collaboration with a university in another country.

While AUQA's core task is conducting institutional quality audits, it is also expected that it will do much more. Consequently, for example, it introduced an online database of good practices in quality assurance in higher education, and convenes an annual quality conference and produces its own series of publications in the quality assurance area.

External Review of AUQA

In 2005, AUQA commissioned an external independent review of its activities, with senior national and international figures on the panel to conduct the review. The Panel produced a positive report on AUQA's performance, its relation to the sector, its achievement of its objectives and vision, and its alignment with INQAAHE's[18] internationally-recognised and widely-used *Guidelines of Good Practice for QA Agencies.*

> "The Review Panel considered that AUQA has established a robust quality audit system that is rigorous and generally well-respected. In addition, the Panel considered that AUQA has established detailed and effective procedures for audit that include auditor appointment and training, extensive and thorough investigation, and consistent implementation. In addition, the Review Panel

acknowledged that AUQA has successfully delivered a demanding audit schedule since its establishment."[19]

Supporting the Review's further finding that "There was general acceptance across the higher education sector that AUQA's audits were fair and accurate and that there was reasonable acceptance of the quality of AUQA's judgements" (ibid) has been positive feedback on their respective Cycle 1 audits from more than three quarters of vice-chancellors.

International benchmarking of external quality assurance agencies[20]

In 2006, a benchmarking project was conducted between AUQA, ACQUIN (*Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute*, Germany), and HETAC (*Higher Education and Training Awards Council*, Ireland). Each of these agencies had recently undergone a self-review and external evaluation, which provided the basis for the benchmarking relative to internationally accepted standards.

The three agencies found the exercise very useful in further reflecting on their core activities as quality bodies. While there were significant national contextual differences, they found that,

> They share similar values and have developed similar mission statements and therefore, not surprisingly, the elements of the quality review processes, practices, and methodologies they all employ are similar. For example, all three EQAs [external quality agencies] have adopted a self-assessment led review process, followed by an expert peer review process to validate the results of the self-assessment. (p24)

One key question that the report addresses is whether these activities are good practice, and whether they actually have an impact, for example, on the student experience and outcomes.

5. Current Challenges facing AUQA

While many of the old challenges remain and as the national higher education quality system matures new sets of challenges emerge such as

- **producing robust evidence that an external quality agency adds value to the sector.** There is a continuing need to demonstrate the benefits of a national quality agency. AUQA has to continue to justify its existence to a range of stakeholders: governments who would like to cut costs; a minority of universities – some of whom would prefer less external auditing and inspection; other institutions who find it burdensome to have to submit to accreditation at program and institutional level and to external quality audit.

- **finding a balance between a *light* or *heavy* touch**. External quality audit and accreditation is a heavy burden on some institutions. The activities of institutional accreditation, program accreditation and quality audit create onerous quality assurance requirements on some higher education providers particularly those smaller higher education providers with limited resources and infrastructure.

- **Managing auditing processes and outcomes**: AUQA has been criticised for looking too much at processes. Any relevant quality assurance audit is focused on both processes and outcomes, and AUQA continues to educate the higher education sector, that this is the basis of any quality assurance audits undertaken. Further, AUQA's "fitness for purpose" approach to audit ensures that providers are assessed against the processes and outcomes within their own institutions.

- **Developing Academic standards**. Whilst still at a relatively early stage of development, AUQA created steps for the investigation of standards at the start of the first audit cycle, and has used this impetus to investigate standards in depth in a selection of higher education providers. Debates and discussions regarding academic standards continue as thinking evolves, and this is currently proving a fertile ground for the further future development of developing and assessing academic standards.

- **Review of higher education**. Australia is still grappling with the consequences of the massification of higher education over the last 20 years. Periodically there is talk about how to work towards world class universities in Australia, the need to differentiate universities from the one-size-fits-all. There have been several major reviews of Australian higher education during the last 15 years with varied and modest success of implementation. The most recent review (the Bradley Review) commenced with a discussion paper in June this year and a planned report before the end of 2008.

- **Experience of international students in Australia**: International students comprise a major component of the Australian student cohort. AUQA is mindful of the need to ensure that this student group is accessing a quality education both onshore and offshore. This will continue to be a challenge to the agency. Some of the key issues include comparability of academic awards by the same institution offered in Australia and also overseas through offshore partners or at offshore campuses; maintaining a typical Australian education experience for international students; maintaining a diversity in the student population that enhances the students' experience.

6. Conclusion

Throughout the OECD, quality assurance and QA agencies are critical to the development of mass systems of higher education, and reinforce performance and accountability as key indicators of the success of any higher education system. The increasing mobility of students, graduates and academic staff within a globalised higher education system make it imperative to consider models of approaches to QA from different regions of the globe. This paper outlines the major components of the Australian QA system for higher education and identifies some of the current challenges that Australia's principal national quality agency is facing as it continues to develop and evolve.

7. References

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Endnotes:

[1] http://www.australia.gov.au/Statistics.html
[2] Ibid.
[3] http://www.goingtouni.gov.au/Main/CoursesAndProviders/ProvidersAndCourses/HigherEducationInAustralia/Default.htm
[4] http://www.aqf.edu.au/aboutaqf.htm#changes
[5] http://www.mceetya.edu.au/mceetya/
[6] http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/MCEETYAS/
[7] http://www.aqf.edu.au/
[8] Hare, J 'AQF muscles up for reform with Dawkins at the helm', Campus Review Vol 18, No. 21, p5 (27 May 2008)
[9] http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/
[10] For further details see
http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/institution_assessment_framework.htm

[11] http://www.auqa.edu.au/

[12] See, for example, http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/default2.htm

[13] Kemp, 1999

[14] http://www.auqa.edu.au/aboutauqa/mission/

[15] http://www.auqa.edu.au/aboutauqa/mission/

[16] See the Audit Manual V5 for detail on the process at
http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/auditmanuals/

[17] Audit reports are available at http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/index.php

[18] International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education. See
http://www.inqaahe.org/

[19] Bateman & Giles, 2006.

[20] For the complete report see
http://www.auqa.edu.au/files/otherpublications/international_benchmarking_final_march_2008.pdf

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Questions for discussion:

1. What methods are used by QA agencies to assess the demands that different stakeholders (regional/federal government, home/international students, established/newer institutions, labour market actors) place on the QA system?

2. As external QA becomes a familiar feature within the higher education landscape, what challenges present themselves to the higher education sector and to QA agencies?

3. In what ways is a credible and rigorous assessment of academic standards part of QA?