

Learning about Learning & Teaching from AUQA audit findings

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***Abstract:** The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was established with responsibility for auditing Australian universities against their stated Mission and goals using a “fitness for purpose” approach based on a self-review portfolio and site visits. Audit reports include Commendations for good practice and Recommendations for improvement, and more recently Affirmations which are a subset of Recommendations. To-date all but one of the universities in Australia has now been audited by AUQA.*

This paper builds-on and extends work done by Barbara de la Harpe of RMIT and Alex Radloff of CQU in their paper ‘Insights about learning & teaching from AUQA commendations’ delivered at HERDSA 2006.

Radloff & de la Harpe focused on the AUQA audit Commendations that related to learning and teaching in order to gain insight into what universities identified as their areas of strength and which were validated by the audit process. They categorised Commendations from 24 audit reports using a qualitative approach, to identify six categories of good practice and used these to identify insights for learning and teaching and to suggest how the sector can build on these to further enhance good practice.

The author of this paper applied the same methodology to AUQA audit Recommendations and concludes the paper by drawing out some issues of relevance for institutional evaluation practitioners. For consistency, the same 24 audit reports were used for this part of the study. The author expressly acknowledges and thanks Alex Radloff and Barbara de la Harpe for their permission to use their research data and information in this paper.

***Keywords:** improving quality, learning and teaching, AUQA audit findings – Affirmations, Commendations, and Recommendations, Good Practices and Opportunities for Improvement, Quality Systems.*

Background

There is now a worldwide emphasis on quality and accountability within Higher Education. In Australia in 2000, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was set up with one of its aims to validate university quality processes and to produce publicly available reports on its audit findings. AUQA audits universities on a five year cycle. The audit process involves a whole of institution audit by a trained audit panel based on a review of the performance portfolio prepared

by the university as part of its self-review and validation process and through a site visit, perusal of documentary evidence and interviews with a wide range of people. The panel uses a sampling technique to gather data across the organisation and its core activities including on and offshore. AUQA holds “each institution responsible for setting and monitoring its own standards, for being able to describe what these standards are, justify its processes for achieving them, and to provide evidence of its performance in these matters” (Woodhouse, 2002, p. 3).

The approach AUQA has adopted is based on a definition of quality as “fit for purpose” and uses the ADRI sequence (Approach, Deployment, Results, Improvement) with an emphasis on self-development and improvement. AUQA has established the Good Practice Website to encourage and assist universities to share and adopt good practice identified through the audit process (Woodhouse, 2002; 2003). AUQA audit reports are public documents and contain Commendations recognising good practice, Recommendations identifying areas for improvement and (more recently) Affirmations, which are a subset of Recommendations acknowledging areas of improvement which have already been identified by the university in its self-review. For the Good Practice Website, universities are invited to submit details of those good practices for which they have received Commendations which AUQA considers to be transferable to others.

A number of authors have considered AUQA report findings with a view to identifying themes and key messages (Carroll, 2005; Cooksey, 2004; Lavery & Wheeler, 2003; Martin, 2003; Stevens, 2005). Radloff and de le Harpe added to this literature by taking as their focus, those Commendations related to learning and teaching from the perspective of supporting student learning.

Learning from AUQA Commendations - Methodology

Radloff and de le Harpe obtained all the AUQA university audit reports available as at January 2006. The 24 audit reports available included four Group of Eight, four Australian Technology Network, four Innovative Research, six New Generation, three (predominantly) Distance Education and three non aligned universities. These reports contained a total of 328 Commendations.

These researchers considered each Commendation and identified those that focused on learning and teaching. Specifically, they selected those Commendations related to “*any activities, processes or initiatives aimed at supporting student learning and enhancing teaching (L&T) at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels*”. Of the 328 Commendations, they identified 125 (38%) that fell into the L&T category. They then interrogated these Commendations including going to the relevant text in the particular audit report to verify the intention for the Commendation, and, using a bottom up approach following Merriam (1990), identified six distinct categories. These categories included:

- three related to the provision of support for student learning - physical, social, and intellectual;
- one related to curriculum design and development;
- one related to the provision of and support for teaching; and
- one related to quality systems and processes.

A description of each category with examples of ‘commendatory’ findings is provided in Table 1. Each of the 125 Commendations was placed into only one category ensuring internal homogeneity, i.e. all Commendations in a category were similar. Where a Commendation related to more than one good practice, it was split into the relevant categories. This process yielded a total of 133 Commendation statements across the six categories.

Table 1: ‘Commendatory’ Findings

Category / No.	Description	‘Commendatory’ Data Analysis
Physical / Six findings	Related to resources and infrastructure that support student learning	The majority of Commendations (5) in the <i>Physical</i> category were for infrastructure with three focusing on technology, two on the development of a learning precinct and one for establishing a ‘beautiful campus environment’ in support of student learning. One Commendation related to the provision of library resources.
Social / 30 findings	Related to institutional climate and activities that encourage and support student engagement	The majority of Commendations (15) in the <i>Social</i> category were for the provision of special support programs and services. Commendations were also for having an institutional climate responsive to students. There was one Commendation each for a first year mentoring program, for supporting first generation university students, and for a sporting scholarship program. Of the 30 Commendations in this category, five (17%) related to support for Indigenous and International students, four (13%) for postgraduate students, and one (3%) for students with disabilities.
Intellectual / 18 findings	Related to activities that support student intellectual engagement	The majority of Commendations in the <i>Intellectual</i> category were for the development of graduate attributes (5) and academic skills (5). In addition, there were two Commendations each for provision of vocationally oriented learning and academic extension programs. There was one Commendation each for embedding knowledge of plagiarism policy, provision of international experience, enabling programs and peer-assisted learning. Of the 18 Commendations in this category, four (22%) related to support for postgraduate students and two (11%) to Indigenous students.
Curriculum / 13 findings	Related to program structures and mode, and the design of courses including learning resources	The majority of Commendations (7) in the <i>Curriculum</i> category were for program structures in particular provision of flexible learning and with two for pathways. In addition, there were three Commendations each for the design of courses (two of which mentioned external input) and the provision of learning resources.
Teaching / 31 findings	Related to professional development, learning and teaching roles, and initiatives including incentive schemes, fellowships and projects	The majority of Commendations (18) in the <i>Teaching</i> category were for provision of some form of professional development activities for academic staff, with four of these mentioning a mentoring or induction program for new academic staff. Commendations were also for initiatives such as project funding and incentive schemes, internships and fellowships. There were three Commendations for leadership roles in teaching and learning. Of the 31 Commendations in this category, 10 (32%) specifically mentioned the work of an academic development centre or similar.
Quality / 35 findings	Related to systems and processes aimed at quality assurance for learning and teaching	The majority of Commendations (23) in the <i>Quality</i> category were for quality assurance review processes for courses, programs or organisational units, with the Library featuring prominently. There were also six Commendations for student feedback systems and four Commendations for processes for maintaining standards. There was one Commendation each for moderation and benchmarking. Of the 35 Commendations in this category, nine (25%) made reference to offshore activities.

Description categories with ‘Commendatory’ findings data breakdown

Commendatory Insights Gained

Radloff and de la Harpe concluded from the prominence of Commendations for quality assurance systems and processes that it would appear that universities have acknowledged the importance of ensuring learning and teaching quality and have some well developed practices in place. Further, they felt that the number of Commendations relating to student feedback suggested that universities were putting in place processes to monitor student perceptions. Quality systems can be further strengthened by more examples of good practice in the areas of standards and benchmarking especially given the importance of international education and the increasing influence of international league tables such as the Melbourne Institute International Standing of Australian Universities and the Times Higher Education Supplement world university Top 20 (Australian Education Network).

Radloff and de la Harpe noted that any of the Commendations in the teaching category recognised the work being undertaken around professional development activities for academic staff, reflecting the growing recognition of the importance of this area for supporting learning and teaching. An important next step is to focus on determining the impact of the different approaches to professional development and engaging in cross institutional research in the area (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). A number of academic development centres were commended for their role in supporting learning and teaching which is encouraging. However, within universities, such centres may often be marginalised, their role and focus questioned and they may regularly face restructuring and funding cuts (Webb, 2000; 2004). Radloff and de la Harpe felt that how best academic development centres can contribute to improving the quality of learning and teaching needs to be more fully considered.

In relation to Commendations for universities' efforts in supporting student engagement, Radloff and de la Harpe noted many examples of good practice focused on special support programs. Given the now extensive literature on factors that contribute to student engagement, persistence, success and satisfaction (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), the next step is to evaluate the impact of existing practices and to expand those that are effective to reach more students since, as Kuh et al. (p. 297) point out, in order to have "a demonstrable impact on the nature and quality of student learning, it is necessary to do many different things better and more frequently so that one or more initiatives touch substantial numbers of students in meaningful ways, rather than investing vast amounts of resources, time, and energy in one large, complicated initiative".

While the Commendations for activities that support student intellectual engagement suggest that the work around graduate attributes has resulted in more attention being paid to identifying and embedding graduate attributes into the curriculum, Radloff and de la Harpe found that further work is now needed to ensure that once, they are embedded, they are taught and assessed (Stevens, 2005). Further, as student numbers increase and cohorts become more diverse, initiatives aimed at supporting academic skill development need to be encouraged and their impact ensured through application of up to date methodologies such as embedding support in the discipline and adopting a developmental approach (Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005).

The Commendations focusing on curriculum identified good practice in award structures and pathways for students with a focus on increasing flexible learning. Radloff and de la Harpe agree for the centrality of the curriculum for learning (Barnett & Coate, 2005), that all universities should aspire to putting forward examples that demonstrate a learner-centred, constructivist approach to curriculum design across the disciplines.

Radloff and de la Harpe suggested that the small number of Commendations relating to infrastructure and resources may be symptomatic of the financial pressures required to maintain a capital works program. However, they also noted that the evidence is very strong that the physical environment contributes

significantly to the quality of learning and teaching (Strange & Banning, 2001). Therefore, they concluded that those managing infrastructure should be proactive in seeking creative ways to ensure that the physical environment is conducive to learning and teaching.

Overall, Radloff and de la Harpe concluded that their analysis of AUQA Commendations had demonstrated that Australian universities were able to evidence a wide variety of exemplars of good practice related to supporting learning and teaching, suggesting that the sector is embracing the new quality agenda and is responding by focusing on strategies to improve institutional quality (Scott, 2003). However, these researchers also highlighted the need for universities to provide more examples supporting student intellectual development and good curriculum design. Hence they argued strongly for adoption of a student-centred approach to learning that involves a focus on intellectual development through for example peer academic mentoring, Supplemental Instruction, and integrated learning support by the discipline specialist (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Gardner, 2005; Tagg, 2003).

Learning from AUQA Recommendations

Radloff and de la Harpe concluded their HERDSA 2006 paper with the following comment:

“We look forward to future Commendations that focus on strategies that universities have put in place to create a learning paradigm. Good practices that demonstrate such a paradigm include intellectually engaging educational goals, high expectations, integrated curricula, active learning, authentic assessment, collaboration among both students and staff, and communities of practice (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Gardner, 2005; Tagg, 2003).”

Universities now need to rise to the challenge of providing evidence of learning environments that “involve students actively at every point, teach students how to learn, develop a campus climate that challenges and supports every person, and ensure that each student has high- quality developmental academic advising” (Gardner, 1994). The AUQA Good Practice website provides a good starting point for more details of good practices and useful contacts. The challenge now is to learn from one another.” (Radloff & de la Harpe 2006, p6)

In responding to this challenge, instead of looking further at Commendations, the author of this paper decided to look instead at the other end of the spectrum of AUQA audit findings, by examining audit Recommendations for improvement. This was in order to see if there was any correlation between the improvement findings with the patterns of good L&T practice identified by Radloff and de la Harpe. For this reason, the same Radloff and de la Harpe methodology and analysis categories were used.¹ However, as the Affirmations category was only introduced part-way through the period of AUQA audits being analysed, the ‘Improvement’ content analysis that follows only counted Recommendations.

The 24 Audit Reports in the review period contained a total of 431 Recommendations (cf 328 Commendations), of which 220 Recommendation were identified as relating to L&T, as broadly defined (cf 128 Commendations). Recommendations for L&T thus made up some 51% of the total of all Recommendations (cf only 38% of all Commendations). Put another way, rounded off to the nearest whole number, the average number of all Recommendations per university was 18, and the average

¹ “Any activities, processes or initiatives aimed at supporting student learning and enhancing teaching (L&T) at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.” A word of caution - this is a very broad working definition and the current author found it sometimes difficult to distinguish between Recommendations that could belong to either L&T or to Research (e.g. those dealing with supervision of postgraduate programs), or within the L&T area those that could be just as easily be counted under the Intellectual, or Curriculum categories (as a closely related concepts - for example, the embedding of Graduate Attributes in the Curriculum).

number of L&T Recommendations per university was 9 (i.e. approximately half), with a range going from only three L&T Recommendations out of a total of 15 being the lowest L&T proportion (20%), to a high of 12 L&T Recommendations out of a total of 13 (92%), and so although there were some distinct ‘outliers’, the normal distribution bell curve still generally applied.

These 220 Recommendations were then interrogated and generally following the bottom up approach following Merriam (1990), allocated to the categories as indicated in Table 2 below, using the same content analysis methodology as Radloff and de la Harpe used for the Commendations in Table 1.

Table 2: Recommendation ‘Improvement’ Findings

Category / No.	Description	‘Improvement’ Data Analysis
Physical / 21 findings	Related to resources and infrastructure that support student learning	The majority of Recommendations related to Resources (66%) and 33% to Infrastructure. A number mentioned both aspects, such as Library resources and ICT systems. 33% specifically mentioned support for PG students
Social / 30 findings	Related to institutional climate and activities that encourage and support student engagement	The majority of Recommendations related in some way or other to campus Climate / responsiveness issues (57%). The next largest categories were Mentoring / induction (15%) and Support programs (13%). Seven specifically mentioned social issues for PG students, three International students, and two Indigenous students
Intellectual / 27 findings	Related to activities that support student intellectual engagement	The majority of Recommendations related to Enabling skills / Extension programs (48%). The next largest category was Graduate Attributes / Learning outcomes (30%). Only a few mentioned PG or International students, and just a couple Academic staff
Curriculum / 33 findings	Related to program structures and mode, and the design of courses including learning resources	The Recommendations were almost evenly split between the Design of courses (45%) and Program structures / mode (42%) and a number of these could have been counted as belonging in both categories. Only 3 specifically mentioned Learning resources, though again it is implicit in Design of courses. A number of findings also related to Quality issues.
Teaching / 32 findings	Related to professional development, learning and teaching roles, and initiatives including incentive schemes, fellowships and projects	The majority of Recommendations related to issues to do with clarifying and supporting the Roles performed by Academic staff (50%). The next largest category was Professional Development (33%), though there was considerable overlap with findings in the Roles category here. Only four mentioned L&T specific initiatives, and only two educational / L&T development units were mentioned.
Quality / 76 findings	Related to systems and processes aimed at quality assurance for learning and teaching	On overwhelming 74% of the Recommendations relate to the need for more systematic deployment of quality assurance policies, processes, and procedures. 18% specifically mentioned Quality systems for Transnational education, and 12% specifically mentioned PG quality. By contrast, very few specifically mentioned issues to do with standards and benchmarking (see AUQA Cycle 2 comment below)

Description categories with ‘Improvement’ findings data breakdown

To simplify for the sake of the comparison of the two sets of findings data, Table 3 overleaf compares the common categories on a percentage distribution basis (raw figures in brackets):

Table 3: Comparison of findings across categories expressed as a %

Category	% of all L&T Commendations (#)	% of all L&T Recommendations (#)
Physical findings	4.5% (6)	9.5% (21)
Social findings	22.5% (30)	13.5% (30)
Intellectual findings	13.5% (18)	12% (27)
Curriculum findings	10% (13)	15% (33)
Teaching findings	23% (31)	14.5% (32)
Quality findings	26% (35)	34.5% (76)

Commendations v Improvement Insights Gained

The statistics indicate that L&T is the single largest category of institutional activity to be evaluated in the AUQA ‘whole-of-institution’ audits that were conducted in the period under review, accounting for just over half of all audit Recommendations.

On a comparative basis, a simple count indicates that the L&T Recommendations outnumber Commendations at a ratio of about 5:4. Or, to put it another way, a typical AUQA audit panel is likely to identify about 20% more opportunities for the improvement in L&T than it will good practices in L&T. This confirms the view that although the acknowledgement of good practice is an important (and substantial) aspect of AUQA quality audit, its primary focus is on institutional improvement and self development.

On a proportional comparison basis, the distribution across the categories is fairly uneven. As a proportion of all L&T findings, the % of Commendations for good practice was higher in the Social; Intellectual (only marginally so); and Teaching categories, while the % of Recommendations for improvement was higher in the Physical; Curriculum; and Quality categories. Or to put it crudely, the areas of L&T that are more likely to receive recognition for good practice from an AUQA audit panel are those that relate to institutional climate and activities that encourage and support student engagement; and those that relate to the professional development of teachers, and learning and teaching improvement initiatives. On the other hand, the areas of L&T more likely to be recommended for improvement are those relating to systems and processes aimed at quality assurance for learning and teaching; program structures and mode, and the design of courses and learning resources; and because of the smaller number of recommendations in this category, to a lesser extent, physical resources and infrastructure. Meanwhile, for activities that support student intellectual engagement, the chances of receiving a commendation or a recommendation are about even.

This aspect of the comparative analysis is broadly consistent with the Commendation-based conclusions of Radloff and de la Harpe in relation to the Teaching; Social; and Curriculum categories.

However, perhaps the most striking statistic to be yielded from a comparison of the raw data is that the largest number of Recommendations for improvement relate to the need for universities to be more systematic in the way that they approach Quality (76 recommendations, compared to 35 commendations, or over 50% difference). What’s more, an impressive 74% of the ‘Quality’ category Recommendations,

either specifically mentioned, or it can be reasonably concluded from the wording, that there is the need for a more systematic approach; a more consistent deployment of the approach across the institution; and/or more systematic analysis and follow-up of the results of quality assurance and feedback mechanisms for continuous quality improvement purposes.

This is at distinct odds with the conclusion drawn by Radloff and de la Harpe “from the prominence of Commendations for quality assurance systems and processes that it would appear that universities have acknowledged the importance of ensuring learning and teaching quality and have some well developed practices in place.” (see p3 above) Further, they felt that the number of Commendations relating to student feedback suggested that universities were putting in place effective processes to monitor student perceptions. Although this conclusion is reasonably supported by looking at only the Commendation data, where Quality was also (by a smaller margin) the largest category, analysis of the Recommendation data suggests that this is an area still in need of considerable improvement, with there being over twice as many Recommendations as Commendations made. Though it is quite possible for the one institution to receive both a Commendation and a Recommendation in the same broad category, it is quite rare for this to happen for the very same quality assurance process or a related outcome. This means that there is approximately twice as many quality improvement events required than there are areas of good practice to be acknowledged.

Other observations worth noting are the relatively large number of recommendations in the Quality category that relate to the need for improved quality systems for offshore L&T activity, and in the PG area, compared to the very small number of findings that specifically mention standards or benchmarking (see the comment on AUQA’s Cycle 2 below).

In a nutshell, this review of a fairly substantial sample of Recommendations made by AUQA in Cycle 1 suggests that there is a need for more ‘quality systems thinking’ by academic planners, and more systematic deployment of such plans is needed to assist staff to teach more effectively, and ultimately for students to learn more productively.

It should also be noted that these same L&T Quality systems and processes overlap and link closely with the other identified improvement areas-especially those that involve curriculum development, teaching development, and learner support systems. It would be fair to characterise these areas of activity lie at ‘the heart’ of L&T quality and are the major areas that educational development or L&T development units should focus on in order to improve the overall quality of learning and teaching in Australian universities.

To conclude, what are the implications of these findings for universities, and especially educational developers and L&T development units?

From their study of AUQA Commendations, Radloff and de la Harpe (both educational developers of note) concluded that there was a need for universities to provide more examples of supporting student intellectual development and good curriculum design, and saw the adoption of a student-centred approach to learning that involves a focus on intellectual development as the way of achieving that.

This study shows that a student-centred approach applies equally for quality improvement, but one in which the student evaluation of teaching and other quality feedback systems provide the vital information for academic decision making about the perceived quality of the student experience. This is an area where the expertise of educational or L&T development units can play a leading role.

But what can educational / L&T development units do?

Before attempting to answer this, readers would have noticed that apart from sorting the various audit findings into categories, so far this content analysis of the AUQA data has been purely quantitative, looking at the raw numbers and percentage comparisons across and within categories. What I intend doing to answer this question is to look briefly at the 'system improvement' findings within the Quality category, and list some of the distinctive *qualitative* terms that point to the essential nature of what AUQA audit panels think needs to be done:

- ensure that feedback is given to students on results and follow-up
- systematically implement procedures for student feedback
- systematic monitoring and reporting of results
- routine monitoring to ensure equivalence
- consistent collection and clearer identification of responsibilities
- identify a consistent way of identifying performance
- consistent implementation within faculties of University policy
- risk-oriented approach to scheduling of evaluations
- effective mechanisms for translating feedback into action
- unification of rules or guidelines for implementation of University policies
- clearly outlined within a framework of accountability for action
- apply consistently across all its campuses
- implement offshore using the same standards
- delegated responsibilities being appropriately fulfilled
- assign responsibility at a senior level
- policies and processes for PG supervision implemented consistently
- moderation appropriately and consistently applied
- regularly subject to thematic analysis to determine systematic improvement
- establish and implement a specific system for offshore
- improvements can be communicated to students
- maintain sufficient oversight of the system
- clarify the respective roles and responsibilities of staff
- planned development of an overall framework
- undertake evaluative studies of student performance
- develop risk identification and management process
- assessment policies being implemented consistently and comprehensively
- systematic means for obtaining employer feedback across all programs

If there is a unifying theme running through all these findings, it has to be that there is a great need for more systematic ('consistent') implementation and a need to delegate appropriate responsibilities for follow-up actions. Please note that this is only a selective sample to conclude this paper. I'm sure that there is another study in there to be done by somebody, if not a topic for a PhD thesis! There is also all the L&T Affirmations data, which to our knowledge has yet to be mined.

And finally, I'll make an observation from the data that perhaps gives some due recognition of the value of work being done by educational / L&T development units in Australian universities. It is worth noting that quite a number of L&T Commendations explicitly mentioned the good work of educational / L&T development units, while there was only a handful of Recommendations for improvement that mention such units. I'll leave the significance of this observation to stand without further comment.

A Closing Word on AUQA's Cycle 2 Audits

AUQA's second cycle of audits will commence in 2008. The focus will be on: 'Closing the loop' from the Cycle 1 audits; and on evaluating Academic Outcomes and Standards. It will be possible for universities to nominate themes. Likely themes for L&T are: Academic QA: Curriculum and Assessment; Academic QA: Admissions and Progress; Quality of Teaching; and, Learning Outcomes. Benchmarking will be vital.

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