

Self-review and Trial Audit or Dress Rehearsal: Preparations for AUQA Audit Undertaken by Australian Universities in 2002

Professor Hilary Winchester, Pro Vice-Chancellor:
Organisational Change & Development, University of South Australia

*Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor: Organisational Change & Development,
University of South Australia, GPO Box 2471, Adelaide, SA 5001, Australia*

Most of the nine universities audited in 2002 undertook some form of self-review which incorporated a trial audit prior to the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) visit. The trial audits predominantly took the form of a self-review and audit process, mainly using internal auditors, in order to develop or refine the Performance Portfolio. One university used a 'dress rehearsal' approach, less than a month before the AUQA visit. All the universities considered this to be a valuable process, although there were significant differences in approach and scope. The value of the trial audit process was principally in refining the portfolio and identifying improvement needs as well as raising awareness amongst university staff. The terminology utilised is confusing and AUQA should consider clarifying this in subsequent versions of the Audit Manual.

1. Aim

The aim of this paper is to examine one aspect of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audit program, the preparatory self-review, to see how the universities that were audited in the first round of audits practised the self-review set out by AUQA in the *Audit Manual*. A particular focus is on whether universities undertook some form of trial or mock audit as part of the self-review. Information was obtained by surveying the nine universities audited by AUQA in 2002. Of these, one university was unable to participate and one replied in part. Of the eight universities that responded, all had undertaken a significant self-review, and seven had implemented a trial or mock audit. All found this to be a useful exercise.

This examination is not driven by statistical relevance, but by the importance of gathering information and sharing experiences at this early stage of the national quality audit for the benefit not just of the universities, but also of AUQA.

2. Terminology

The survey revealed a considerable variety in the terminology adopted by universities. The AUQA *Audit Manual* (Version 1) acknowledges the variation in terminology: 'AUQA bases each audit on a critical self-review (also referred to as self-evaluation, self-audit, or self-study) by the institution or agency subject to the audit' (AUQA, 2002, p. 18).

The earlier version of the Manual referred to this part of the process as the 'self-review (self-audit)' (AUQA, 2001, p. 16) while the call for papers for this Forum introduced another term when it suggested 'conducting self-assessment' as a possible topic.

Of the universities surveyed, only one used the term 'self-review', while the others referred to their preparatory work as 'internal quality review', 'organisational self-assessment', a 'self-audit', 'mock audit' and 'trial audit'. A senior administrator at another university commented, 'On the issue of the institutional self-audit, I must confess to being confused about the difference (if any) between a self-audit and a mock audit'.

The development by AUQA of an agreed set of definitions would be a useful outcome of this paper. Part of the reason for the multiplicity of terms arises from the variations within the two AUQA Audit

Manuals, and from AUQA's direction that: 'institutions and agencies to be audited in 2003 should follow this version [Version 1, May 2002] of the Manual...2002 auditees may continue to follow Version 0, or may follow this revised version, at their discretion' (AUQA, 2002, p. 7).

Having an agreed set of definitions could help to alleviate further confusion as updated manuals are produced.

3. Approaches to Self-review and Trial Audit

There is no single model for self-review. Indeed, the first decision might be whether an organisation interprets self-review as a process or as an event. Self-review might be an ongoing process that is built into all activities in a sense of continuous improvement; it might be an ongoing process that leads to a report to the governing body for confirmation or re-direction; it might be a long event that leads to major change; it might be a brief event that provides a snapshot for comparison with an earlier snapshot; and so on. (AUQA, 2002, p. 19).

Across the sector, there seem to be essentially two distinct approaches to self-review in preparation for AUQA audit. The first may be best described as self-review incorporating a trial audit. Essentially, self-review consists of a process of self-examination and reflection prior to setting down the information and evaluation in the Performance Portfolio. The trial or mock audit included as an event within the self-review may have a number of objectives, which may vary from identifying gaps in a university's quality assurance process, to suggesting improvements or redrafting the portfolio.

The second approach is the 'full dress rehearsal' or practice approach. This is often used in other contexts in universities in association with professional accreditations of courses and other types of audits (e.g. occupational health and safety). In effect, the focus is on the visit of the external auditors and the objective is to improve the presentation on the day. A dress rehearsal approach is driven by an impending scheduled visit and is likely to have limited 'potential to lead to improvements even without AUQA's intervention' (AUQA, 2001, p. 5). In the dress rehearsal approach, the AUQA audit is very much an 'event', preceded by a practice, even more so than the 'snapshot' analogy used in the quotation (above) from the AUQA Manual.

All the models described by AUQA in the above quotation fall into the first category of approach. No matter whether they are conceived as part of a long event of continuous and systematic review, reflection and improvement, or a snapshot event, they all have the goal of self-examination and assessment. In contrast, the second approach focuses very clearly on having a practice before the major event of the audit visit.

Our survey revealed a third hybrid approach in which the self-review was combined with the dress rehearsal. In this example, while half the university's schools were notified that they might be 'trial audited', the audit team followed the same sort of procedures that AUQA would follow in relation to the University. Accordingly, the schools that were included in the trial audit were informed only a couple of weeks beforehand. In this way, the audit team sought to simulate conditions that would apply in the AUQA audit.

4. Factors in Determining the Approach

A range of factors influenced the approaches adopted by universities in 2002. The most important ones were the timing of the AUQA audit and the current state of planning within the institution. Where a university had recently engaged in significant restructuring or other strategic change or planning review, the self-review with a trial audit could be seen as an unnecessary duplication or repetition. If, in addition, a university's audit visit was scheduled for early in the audit year, the process needed to be streamlined into the time available.

Of the eight universities who responded, two conducted their self-reviews and trial audits independently of the AUQA process. These exercises were also well in advance of the AUQA audit, and were planned before they were included on AUQA's schedule, being conducted 15 and 26 months before AUQA's audit visit.

One university indicated that it had planned a trial audit as part of its self-review process, but that this decision was overtaken by the publication of the national audit schedule. In this case, the amount of time available to the university for its preparation led to the abandonment of the trial audit idea.

Of the remaining five universities, the time between the self-review process and the AUQA audit was either six to seven months or two to three weeks. Three universities opted for internal self-reviews which included no external members. The fourth conducted a trial audit with a panel of five members, four of whom were external to the University. One institution used a single overseas auditor. One conducted 'several mini mock audits' two to three weeks ahead of the AUQA audit.

The survey also sought information on the relationship of the trial audit to the production of the Performance Portfolio. A range of responses was received. Of the seven universities who had undertaken a self-review, two had undertaken this more than a year before the AUQA audit, so clearly did not have a portfolio at that stage. Two universities had completed portfolios, while another worked from a draft at the time of the self-review. This draft portfolio, and one which had been completed, underwent substantial development and structural alteration as a result of the trial audits. The remaining two universities produced their Performance Portfolio following the self-review. One respondent pointed out that the changes to their portfolio resulted 'partly from the trial audit, partly as a result of our increasing understanding of the issues and collation of data'.

There was one case, where there was only a two-to-three week interval between the mini mock audits and the AUQA audit, when no modifications were made to the portfolio after the self-review. This latter example is the single instance, amongst the 2002 respondents, where the trial audit could be interpreted as a 'dress rehearsal' approach.

5. Benefits of Self-review

All the universities surveyed felt that the trial audit was an extremely useful part of the self-review process. In fact, most of the respondents were enthusiastic in estimating the value of the self-review and all would recommend a trial audit to other universities. Even the university that had been unable to complete a trial audit, because of time constraints, postulated that it would have been 'a useful way to sharpen self-assessment tools, begin the task of gathering information and to raise awareness of quality assurance issues among staff'. Important products of the self-review processes that respondents itemised included:

- excellent contribution to the preparation of the Performance Portfolio
- beneficial in that units reflected on their quality management processes and outcomes
- extremely valuable in preparing for the AUQA audit
- extremely valuable in identifying long-term quality improvement needs and strategies
- helpful preparation of staff for the experience of an audit interview
- opportunity for briefing staff on quality generally and the portfolio
- tested the value and understanding of the quality model in the units audited
- provided practice for the 'real audit'
- obtained feedback from an experienced auditor on the performance portfolio, and the quality processes described in the portfolio so as to identify deficiencies.

6. Conclusion

While, as one respondent commented, 'The jury is still out on the long-term value of the whole business', this survey of universities that were audited in 2002 confirms that the auditees see value in the trial audit aspect of the self-review. It provides some evidence for validating AUQA's claim that: 'a self-evaluation...not only enables the auditee to supply the information required by AUQA, but also has the potential to lead to improvements even without AUQA's intervention' (AUQA, 2001, p. 5).

References

Australian Universities Quality Agency. (2001). *Audit manual: Version 0*. Melbourne: Australian Universities Quality Agency.

Australian Universities Quality Agency. (2002). *Audit manual: Version 1*. Melbourne: Australian Universities Quality Agency.