

# **A sustainable model for student voice in institutional quality assurance**

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## **Abstract**

*Institutional audit is a key component of the external quality assurance framework for New Zealand universities. This paper considers the current state of student voice in institutional quality audit and how it can be enhanced and sustained and consequently how quality assurance can better support student success. It can be concluded from the recently completed Cycle 5 academic audit that students do have input to university planning, policy development and monitoring of key academic activities. While students were able to make a submission to Cycle 5 audit panels, they were not members of panels. Cycle 6 will have student auditors and this paper sets out a model for developing and sustaining the student voice as an integral component of quality assurance. The model identifies the environment, mandate and key components of achieving sustainable change. Its development has drawn on both New Zealand and Australian experience.*

## **Introduction**

The developing body of research and practice into student voice and students as partners includes initiatives at course, teacher, department and institutional level, although Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) suggest that there is a “focus on partnership activities that are small-scale ...” (p1). This emerging initiatives paper examines a student voice initiative at system level across a university sector. It outlines approaches to strengthen student voice in sectoral quality assurance, and thereby position that system better to support student success.

The Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) has recently released the design of its sixth cycle of academic audit (AQA, 2017). One of the components of Cycle 6 is that audit panels will include students (or recent graduates) as full and equal members. This paper assesses the current state of student voice in New Zealand universities as articulated in the Cycle 5 academic audit reports for universities (AQA 2016) and sets out a series of initiatives intended to support students as successful members of audit panels. This initiative is not without challenges and the paper poses a number of issues that have yet to be fully resolved. We will be grateful for feedback and advice on these matters. For background, we briefly set out drivers for the decision to include students as members of audit panels.

The decision to include students (or recent graduates) as auditors was driven by a number of factors. First, a 2015 external review of AQA recommended “AQA and the AQA Board actively consider and consult on ways to enhance the student voice and the engagement of students with the audit process” (Crawford *et al.*, 2015). As an initial response to the recommendation AQA confirmed with the New Zealand Union of Students’ Associations (NZUSA) that NZUSA would be the entity with which AQA would engage to nominate the student member of its Board. In turn, NZUSA agreed to amend their processes so that the AQA Board appointment would normally be an appointment for more than one year.

Secondly NZUSA, which has a record of leading thinking and initiatives to progress the student voice in New Zealand, worked with Ako Aotearoa (the national centre for tertiary teaching excellence) to examine how tertiary organisations could use student voice effectively to improve academic quality (Heathrose Research, 2013). This project generated a series of good practice guides and an ongoing campaign to advance the student voice. While this project and its outputs are significant in their own right, they also mean that New Zealand has national-level capability and experience in supporting and progressing student voice.

A third factor was the desire to remain consistent with what is considered to be international best practice in quality assurance. In this case, Scotland is considered to be the leading jurisdiction in terms of how the student voice is developed, supported and engaged in both quality assurance and quality enhancement at the national level. The quality assurance regime for New Zealand universities has a number of characteristics in common with the Scottish system: both are relatively small, but internationally well-performing systems, mature in terms of quality assurance practices and cultures. They both employ a cyclical model of external quality assurance that values the role of peers and is enhancement-oriented. Closer to home, Australia is undertaking significant work towards embedding an ethos of student voice in higher education institutions (Studentvoiceaustralia, n.d.). Although its quality assurance system adopts a different model, Australian developments in terms of student voice in institutions and in the national regulatory regime are also of considerable interest.

The next section of this paper assesses the current situation for the student voice in quality assurance by examining Cycle 5 academic audit reports for the eight New Zealand universities and the external review for AQA. Between 2013 and 2016, New Zealand universities underwent a fifth cycle of academic audit; AQA was reviewed in 2015.

### **Student voice in New Zealand universities**

Cycle 5 academic audit of universities utilised a framework of 40 guideline statements, including GS 1.3 “Student input: Universities should facilitate student input to planning, policy development and monitoring of key academic activities” that particularly focuses on the student voice. Audit panels may make commendations, where they consider processes or practices represent particularly good practice, affirmations of enhancements that universities have already identified and which, in the assessment of the audit panel, are likely to yield good outcomes and recommendations, where the panel considers practices should be improved.

With respect to GS 1.3 audit panels commended universities for “using systematic mechanisms for ensuring student input is sought, feedback given and information shared across all levels of the University” (Auckland C2); “the wide-ranging and effective contribution made by students to the University’s planning, reviews, academic activity and services” (Canterbury C1); and “overall commitment and systematic approach to gaining student input into the activities and processes of the University” (Otago C4) and affirmed an enhancement initiative “[to] review ... ways to enhance student involvement in and input to academic policy developments, monitoring and decision-making” (Massey A1). No recommendations were made, suggesting that New Zealand universities demonstrate good practice in student input to decision making.

Reviewing the full-text of audit reports for GS 1.3 indicates that all universities have well established class-representative systems, and a number of panels commented on the support, training and development provided for class representatives. There were mixed models among universities for managing class representatives, but the majority were managed by students’ associations. All universities have student members of academic committees and again audit

panels commented on training and support for students to be effective members of these committees. In addition to academic decision-making, panels also commented on mechanisms for students to provide input to university decision-making. These mechanisms included regular meetings with the Vice-Chancellor and other members of university executive teams, provision to make presentations to Council, and consultation on specific initiatives. A minority of universities currently include students on review panels, but others are considering this. While the majority of comments were positive, panels did also comment on some challenges including ensuring that the student voice reflects its diversity, competing time pressures on students and ensuring that students are aware of the impact of their input (closing the loop).

The Cycle 5 academic audit process included an invitation to the students' association(s) at the university being audited to make their own submission to the audit panel. Five student submissions were received from the audits of four universities. Three of those submissions provided a detailed, student-centric, analysis of the guideline statements. The other two, intentionally, provided more individual perspectives. Other student associations which did not provide a submission indicated that this was because they were well involved with the university's own self-review processes and felt their perspectives were adequately reflected. This was also the case for students' associations which did provide submissions.

Overall, in Cycle 5 therefore, the assessment of audit panels was that student input into academic decision-making was adequate and that student voice was effective through class and other representative systems. For most universities, students were involved in self-review processes and while students were invited to make a submission to the panel for the academic audit of a university, academic audit panels did not include a student member.

### **Developing a sustainable model**

Having considered the drivers for including students (or recent graduates) as members of Cycle 6 audit panels within the current context for student voice in New Zealand universities, this section sets out the issues surrounding this inclusion together with approaches being employed to address them. The development of this model is a joint (or partnership) approach between AQA and NZUSA as both parties recognise their mutual interest in achieving this objective.

The first issue connected with students as members of audit panels was to establish an appropriate mandate. This was achieved through consultation on the design of the Cycle 6 audit model with universities and approval from the AQA Board (which has a student member).

The next steps concerned raising awareness among potential student auditors and their availability. Awareness is being developed through engagement and communications strategies. The AQA Executive Director speaks at the annual NZUSA conference for incoming administrations at the start of the year. In addition, NZUSA contributes a student voice column to the quarterly AQA newsletter, which is distributed to presidents and educational vice-presidents of students' associations.

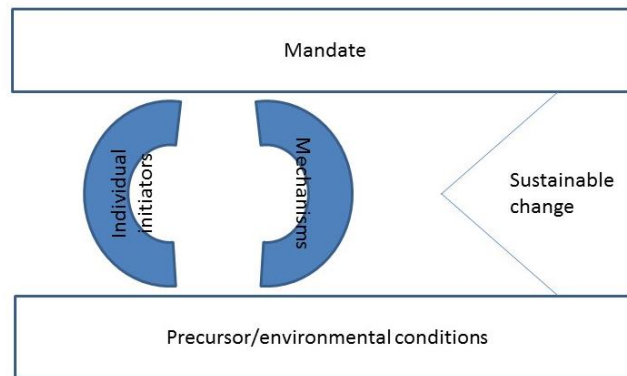
Availability goes beyond raising awareness to ensuring that student auditors have sufficient background and preparation is quality assurance (auditor specific training is provided for all auditors). It involves building both capacity and capability. The capability dimension in particular aligns well the NZUSA's desire to build capability among senior student representatives. NZUSA provides training and professional development that support students first taking on class representative roles, then department or faculty roles, leading to university-level representative roles. NZUSA recognise that one of the challenges in building senior

student representative capability is that student administrations turn over frequently, often annually. It has therefore initiated, with AQA, an annual ‘Student Voice Summit’ (NZUSA, 2017). This event focusses on and supports knowledge transfer between administrations. Availability is also an ongoing process. Given that audits are not scheduled to commence until 2021, maintaining contact with potential auditors is an issue.

To make these aspects of mandate, awareness and availability sustainable, AQA and NZUSA have codified their intent and activities in a Memorandum of Understanding (AQA and NZUSA, 2017). In Australia, TEQSA has signed a series of MoUs with student representative bodies (TEQSA, 2017).

## Discussion

Having students as member of audit panels can be seen from a change perspective. This has relevance for the Australian sector where there are similar moves towards embedding an ethos of student voice and a framework and principles to facilitate this have been developed (Varnham, 2017). The approaches have learnt from one another and a common model of change has been developed to explain and support this change (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Sustainable change model**

The model recognises that while committed individuals are necessary to initiate change, to be enduring these individuals need to be supported by a mandate and mechanisms. It also recognises that the context and precursor conditions for change are relevant. The components are not mutually discrete from one another.

Models of change and innovation often characterise innovation as either top-down or bottom up (see Marshall, 2010 for a summary of models of change in universities), and suggest that aspects of both are needed for sustainable change. In our approach, the mandate component can be seen as analogous to top-down change and the activities of motivated individuals as bottom-up. In our approach, the top down and bottom-up approaches are connected in the structure/mechanism component that is intended to continue to provide momentum should either the bottom-up component weaken (for example, through turn-over of individuals) or the top-down become obfuscated through other priorities.

The environmental/precursor conditions recognise that change occurs in a context. The New Zealand and Australian environments differ from one another in terms of their approaches to quality assurance, and their recent histories of students’ associations and student voice within universities; and both differ from Scotland. The environmental component also serves to remind both initiatives that approaches that seem effective in one context may be less so in

another, due to differing environmental or precursor conditions. Although the New Zealand initiative has a specific intent of having students as members of audit panels in its next cycle of academic audit, it has found the Australian student voice initiative to be a valuable way to test its assumptions and thinking about how to progress.

In addition to improving the quality of the audit itself, other benefits are likely to accrue from developing student auditors. Most immediately these include the potential to also contribute to programme or departmental reviews and accreditation panels. Importantly, they have potential to strengthen professional development for all student representatives, including class reps and to assist in their achievement, retention and success.

### **Next steps and issues for audience discussion**

From the New Zealand perspective, the next steps are to assess progress to date and to move into the recruitment and retention of potential student auditors. Feedback on our progress so far and advice on key considerations for the next stage would be appreciated. In particular, we would appreciate advice on how to retain contact with potential student auditors and on improving our mechanism for sustaining the student voice in institutional quality audit.

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