

Do the Postgraduate Students Agree with the Academic Auditors?

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers whether the issues that postgraduate students state need improvement are consistent with those issues contained in the recommendations made by academic auditors.

The paper proposes that the academic auditors do not necessarily know what postgraduate students really want. Having said this, the students do not always know what they want. Or, for that matter, what is “good” for them. The challenge for each university is to use a multi-method approach to quality assurance by triangulating the results from its student surveys with the reports of the academic auditors. Further triangulation then has to be done with student focus groups, anecdotal feedback, government directives and policy and with research and data from other sources. Finally, the information gained must be used to benefit students.

The principal focus of this paper will be on three primary data sources. First, the recommendations contained in the eight reports of the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit, second, a satisfaction survey of Masters and PhD postgraduate students at Lincoln University and, third, unstructured interviews with postgraduate students at Lincoln University.

Introduction

Postgraduate education in all New Zealand universities is coming under increased scrutiny as students are required to pay a greater proportion of their tuition fees and increasingly think of themselves as a client in receipt of services. Further, as a result of government mechanisms such as the Performance Based Research Fund (the Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom and the Research Training Scheme in Australia are parallel assessments), institutions are asked to be accountable for postgraduate learning. The New Zealand government is also asking tertiary institutions to “strengthen research, knowledge creation and uptake for our knowledge society” and to achieve this, universities need to ensure they are providing high quality postgraduate education.¹

Academic Audits, which are now undertaken in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, England, Scotland, Denmark, France and the Netherlands) provide an additional level of evaluation and scrutiny. Finally, universities themselves want feedback from their students and use surveys and focus groups to obtain this.

This is the story of one university’s experience with feedback using three quality assurance processes. Lincoln University (Canterbury, New Zealand) is a small specialised and research-led university with an applied and inter-disciplinary approach to its teaching and research. It has over 400 Masters and PhD students. Further, 25% of these students are international and 47% study part-time.

This paper describes three quality assurance processes implemented at Lincoln University – an external one in the form of an academic audit in 2000 and two internal ones in the form of a postgraduate satisfactory survey in 2003 and unstructured interviews with postgraduate students, also during 2003. This provides a multi-method, or pluralistic approach to quality assurance. Quality assurance is loosely defined as a process to assure and reassure society that an institution is delivering the service it is paid to deliver, to assure clients (students) that the service is up to scratch and for the institution to assure itself that standards are maintained.²

No individual process is perfect and in each case questions can be asked about the adequacy of the evaluation tool. But each process did result in a series of recommendations and suggestions for enhancing the postgraduate student experience. Each process also led to significant discussion by students, staff and management. Finally, each process led to internal changes and improvements as the information provided was used to benefit students. Together, the quality assurance processes provide a perspective on the issues that are important in the postgraduate research experience for both the student and the institution. This feedback is useful for establishing current performance and informative for identifying future improvements.

Academic Auditors’ Recommendations

The New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (AAU) was established in 1993 as an independent body to consider, review and comment on the effectiveness of universities’

¹ Ministry of Education. (2004), Statement of Education Priorities, p. 8.

² Ellis, R. (ed) (1993), Quality Assurance for teaching. The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, United Kingdom, p. 4

mechanisms for monitoring and enhancing academic quality and standards. The audit process involves:

- Each university conducting a self-review exercise;
- Each university preparing an audit portfolio;
- A site visit by the AAU and academic auditors; and
- Production of a public report by the AAU.

The common theme chosen for the second cycle of audits of New Zealand universities was – research policy and management, the teaching/research nexus, provision and support for postgraduate students. The 85 recommendations concerning the part of the theme associated with “*provision and support for postgraduate students*” in the eight reports of the universities have been analysed.

Using key words, the recommendations have been sorted into the three general categories or domains of: Management; Supervision; and Support. The domain “Management” covers issues concerned with how a university is organised, including its processes and policies. The domain “Supervision” covers all aspects to do with supervision experience, including the supervisor, the monitoring of progress and the research experience. The domain “Support” captures the wider study experience, including computing, library, culture and pastoral support issues. The responses have then been further sorted using sub-domains (Table 1).

This sorting exercise was done manually and has enabled the “voice” of the auditor to be heard. The recommendations, which were coded by one person, were sorted twice to check for validity and consistency. Although there may be some overlap in aspects of the content of each recommendation, each recommendation has been allocated to one sub-domain only.

The academic auditors have spread their recommendations evenly across the three domains. The results of this analysis are that 39% of recommendations fall into the area of “Management”; 32% fall into “Supervision” and 29% fall into “Support.” The single greatest category of response was in the sub-domain “Communication and support”, with 12 recommendations. “Resources”, which is a sub-domain of “Support”, accounted for just 8 recommendations – 9% of the total. This result is significantly different from the student survey results where “Resources” was the single greatest category, with 50% of responses.

Table 1 – Auditors’ Recommendations for Improvement, All Universities

Management			
	Communication and support	12	
	Maori	6	
	Quality assurance	3	
	Administration and policy	6	
	Examinations	6	
Management Total		33	39%
Supervision			
	Mutual expectations	3	
	Student progress and monitoring	6	
	Supervisor	9	
	Training	9	
Supervision Total		27	32%
Support			
	Information	8	
	Services	5	
	Student input and culture	4	
	Resources	8	
Support Total		25	29%
Grand Total		85	100%

Examples of academic audit recommendations in the sub-domain of “Communication and support” include:

- *That a more consistent approach be adopted with regard to the role of Associate Deans (postgraduate students).*
- *The introduction of KPIs and service targets are likely as a result of the current review of the Office and efforts in this regard are strongly endorsed.*

Examples of academic audit recommendations in the sub-domain of “Resources” include:

- *That checks be made that stated school minima for financial and other resources are at least equal to the agreed minima, and are being achieved.*
- *Priority be given to establishing and achieving resource minima for postgraduate students and that these be publicised widely to students.*

The 12 recommendations that pertain to Lincoln University (Table 2) were spread in much the same way as the total spread across all universities with – “Management” 33%, “Supervision” 42% and “Support” 25%.

Table 2 – Auditors’ Recommendations for Improvement, Lincoln University

Management			
	Communication and Support	1	
	Maori	1	
	Quality assurance	0	
	Administration and policy	0	
	Examinations	2	
Management Total		4	33%
Supervision			
	Mutual expectations	1	
	Student progress and monitoring	2	
	Supervisor	1	
	Training	1	
Supervision Total		5	42%
Support			
	Information	2	
	Services	0	
	Student input and culture	0	
	Resources	1	
Support Total		3	25%
Grand Total		12	100%

Students’ Perceptions of Their Postgraduate Experience

In 2003, a Postgraduate Student Satisfaction Survey was carried out.³ The survey asked 419 current PhD and Masters students to rate their *satisfaction* and *importance* with 96 items using a five-point Likert scale. The survey covered supervision, research environment, programme organisation, the library and computing and the university environment. The survey had a response rate of 43% and the results represent the views of 180 Masters and PhD students. When analysed, these 96 items provided an assessment of current performance. This satisfaction approach and methodology is widely used and has the strength that it focuses on student perceptions of their learning and programme quality.⁴

Students were also asked a series of open-ended questions about their overall evaluation of their postgraduate experience and it is the descriptive data obtained that forms the basis of this section on students’ perceptions. Although the questions in the survey are different from the theme in the academic audit, both sets of results are valid perspectives on the postgraduate experience and have the aim of improving the postgraduate experience.

A total of 254 comments were received in response to the open-ended question “*Apart from reducing fees, what three things could the University do to provide better value for money to its postgraduate students.*” Again, using key words, the responses have been sorted into the three general categories or domains of: Management; Supervision; and Support. Again, although one person completed the coding, the comments were coded twice to check for validity. This exercise has enabled the “voice” of the student to be heard and the comments,

³ Bean, E. (2004), Postgraduate Student Satisfaction Survey Report, Lincoln University, 2003.

⁴ Richardson, J.T.E. (2003), Instruments for obtaining student feedback: A review of the literature: Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of teaching and learning in higher education. A Report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England, p 16

when read in full, are a deep and rich source of feedback. Assigning key words requires a judgement to be made on the intended context of the comment from the students' perspective.

A total of 82% of student responses were concerned with "Support" (Table 3). Support includes the information students receive about the university at the time of enrolment or registration; support services (e.g. workshops); student input and culture (e.g. peer support, social space); and resources (e.g. library, computing, workspace). The sub-domain "Resources" accounted for 50% of all comments received. Students appear to be very concerned with day-to-day matters and for creating a nurturing and conducive study environment or "home".

Table 3 – Postgraduate Student Comments for Improvement, 2003 Survey

Management		
Communication and support	0	
Maori	0	
Quality assurance	0	
Administration and policy	5	
Examinations	13	
Management Total	18	7%
Supervision		
Mutual expectations	0	
Student progress and monitoring	0	
Supervisor	27	
Training	0	
Supervision Total	27	11%
Support		
Information	19	
Services	44	
Student input and culture	18	
Resources	128	
Support Total	209	82%
Grand Total	254	100%

Interestingly, if the original 96 items in the survey are ranked in order of *importance* to postgraduate students, the five top items were concerned with the existence of a supportive learning environment and four items were to do with resources. The items ranked in order of importance are:

1. Computer reliability and performance.
2. Range of serials, periodicals, journals.
3. Range of database and electronic resources.
4. Availability of computers.
5. Usefulness of feedback from postgraduate supervisor.

This importance ranking of the items reinforces the analysis of the open-ended comments in terms of student desire for improved support.

The open-ended comments received from students concerning the sub-domain "Resources" are along the following lines:

- *Better IT facilities, more access, better and more recently updated computers. A postgraduate photocopying rate that is cheaper than undergraduate and available for use in library facilities. More organised social events for postgrads.*
- *More career services. More computer access. More social activities for postgrads.*
- *Better computer facilities, make more available and introduce better software. Provide better individual work places in departments for those in the critical writing up stage of their work.*
- *Sucks big time. Not any journals on my topic area and few outdated books...not overly helpful at inter-lending.*

There were no open-ended comments received from students in the sub-domain “Communication and support”.

A third evaluation exercise provided further evidence about important issues from the perspective of postgraduate students. During 2003, informal discussions, or unstructured interviews, were held with postgraduate students over a 10 week period. Notes taken at these sessions generated 253 separate comments about the postgraduate study experience.⁵ The discussions were held as part of the process of developing the Postgraduate Student Satisfaction Survey. For this paper, comments have again been sorted by key word and the results overwhelmingly indicate that issues concerning “Support” are of most interest to students.

A total of 87% of all comments received were concerned with “Support” (Table 4). Further, a total of 40% of all comments received were concerned with “Resources” (library, computing and workspace) and a further 28% were concerned with “Student input and culture” (mentoring, peer support, social space and the student experience). The face-to-face feedback approach may have meant some students were reluctant to discuss sensitive issues, such as cultural factors and issues related to their supervisor, could mean that some aspects are under-represented in the analysis.

⁵ Dawson, R. (2003) *Report on Postgraduate Student Anecdotal Comments 2003*, Lincoln University (unpub).

Table 4 – Postgraduate Unstructured Interviews, 2003

Management			
	Communication and Support	11	
	Maori	0	
	Quality assurance	0	
	Administration and policy	2	
	Examinations	0	
Management Total		13	6%
Supervision			
	Mutual expectations	0	
	Student progress and monitoring	0	
	Supervisor	14	
	Training	0	
Supervision Total		14	7%
Support			
	Information	16	
	Services	25	
	Student input and culture	60	
	Resources	85	
Support Total		186	87%
Grand Total		213	100%

How Seriously is Feedback Taken?

In their reports, academic auditors tend to comment about the overall infrastructure and operation of the university – the management and the committee structures, the policies, monitoring of student progress and support. In contrast, in the Postgraduate Student Satisfaction Survey and unstructured interviews with postgraduate students, comments tended to focus on the day-to-day issues and the creation of a conducive study environment. That is, the issues that affect daily work – availability of computers, ranges of books in the library, adequate workspace, social space, collegiality and peer support. The survey highlights the importance of fully integrating postgraduate students into the university culture and community. Both the students and the auditors uncover valuable elements and insights into the issues that affect the postgraduate student experience.

Triangulation with other feedback mechanisms, such as international data and research, student-staff committees, anecdotal comments and focus groups, adds a further dimension to the issue of identifying what postgraduate students really want.

International research suggests that the demographic and academic characteristics of postgraduate students influence their study expectations. Research in the United Kingdom identified three issues relevant to postgraduate support, which are summarised in the Brown report as:

- Many postgraduates arrive outside the orientation week. When they do arrive, there is often little assistance in helping them settle and make friends. Each Division has a different approach to induction and welcoming its students, so experiences are variable;
- Campus facilities are not available throughout the year. When undergraduate students are on study breaks or during the summer holiday, many support services offer reduced, or no, services; and

- Lack of study and social support can lead postgraduates to a feeling of isolation. This, in turn, can lead to failure to complete work or depression.⁶

This research supports the findings of the postgraduate satisfaction survey and informal anecdotal feedback. It helps explain why students are primarily concerned with issues of “Support” and “Resources.”

There are differing views about the relative importance of feedback from students on issues not concerned directly with teaching and learning. Some research (Richardson, 2003) suggests that feedback on the wider institutional services and facilities can confuse the picture:

‘...A different issue is whether student feedback should be concerned solely with curricular matters or whether it should also be concerned with the entire range of facilities available at institutions of higher education (including computing, library, recreational and sporting facilities). Although the latter considerations are undoubtedly important in evaluating the student experience, it can be argued that they are not intrinsic to the quality of teaching and learning. There is research evidence that students’ perceptions of institutional facilities are less important as predictors of their overall satisfaction than their perceptions of the academic features of their programmes. Moreover, including additional scales about the broader institutional environment in feedback questionnaires might undermine those instruments as indicators of teaching quality. It would be preferable to evaluate institutional facilities as an entirely separate exercise...’⁷

It is generally assumed that feedback such as an audit report or a student survey will help an institution to improve its policies, processes, support and resource allocation. Further it is generally assumed that academic staff will take the recommendations and comments seriously. However, in practice this is not always the case. Academic staff may resist making changes because they think that the student or the auditor does not know what is best for them or because there are no incentives to make change. Academics also tend to be sceptical about external auditors and about surveys not conducted by themselves and may have concerns about sample size and methodology. Richardson (2003) concludes that:

‘... many students and teachers believe that student feedback is useful and informative, but many teachers and institutions do not take student feedback seriously. The main issues are: the interpretation of feedback; institutional reward structures; the publication of feedback; and a sense of ownership of feedback on the part of both teachers and students.’⁸

It is not possible to state with certainty that a specific initiative or action came about at Lincoln University because of the visit of the academic auditors or a student completing a questionnaire. However, it is possible to reflect on progress over the past four years and note

⁶ Brown, T. (2003), Providing for the postgraduate market: An Investigation into Exclusive Facilities For Postgraduates. National Postgraduate Committee, United Kingdom, p.23.

⁷ Richardson, J.T.E. (2003), Instruments for obtaining student feedback: A review of the literature: Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of teaching and learning in higher education. A Report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England, p 26.

⁸ *ibid* p 33.

where improvements have been made in the three areas of management, supervision and support. Selected examples are contained in Table 5.

Table 5 - What has Happened at Lincoln University Since the Academic Audit and Survey?

	Academic Audit (2001 -)	Survey * (2004 -)
Management	<p>Postgraduate student representation is formally sought through Divisions.</p> <p>Research Centres of Excellence have been established.</p> <p>Information on the web and in course information handbooks has been updated.</p> <p>Annual postgraduate conference funded by the University, but organised by the students.</p>	<p>Processes for dissertations and thesis submission - a web friendly version of the processes for submission of thesis and dissertations has been prepared and the House Rules have been reviewed.</p>
Supervision	<p>Revised content of Division handbooks.</p> <p>Mutual expectations document finalised and promoted (used in early discussion between student and supervisor).</p> <p>Reviewed policies – using examiners as thesis examiners; circumstances for waiving PhD oral examinations; selection of supervisors.</p>	<p>Supervisor training workshop and development of a programme for ‘new supervisors’</p>
Support	<p>Increase in the number and value of postgraduate scholarships.</p> <p>Infrastructure - discussions among Divisions about the access to resources e.g. an expectation that a PG should attend one national conference.</p>	<p>Infrastructure – a ‘minimum standard’ of service provision is proposed for computing, library, workspace and supervision.</p> <p>Culture - The orientation programme has been enhanced. There is more active involvement from the student association (networks social functions and newsletters). A postgraduate conference was held in 2003 and 2004. Another is scheduled for 2005.</p> <p>Library – An investment in access to a greater range of databases and electronic resources has been made.</p>

* reporting on the Survey incorporates follow-up to the unstructured interviews

How we *use* the results and recommendations of the surveys and audit reports is perhaps even more important than the results themselves. The results and recommendations need to be incorporated into the institution's quality management framework. In doing so, the following guiding principles should be adhered to:

- Obtain student input into the quality assurance processes;
- Ensure that quality assurance processes are supported by the Vice-Chancellor and embedded into central planning;
- Obtain academic staff buy-in to the quality assurance process;
- Triangulate the results using several sources; and
- Feedback the results of the quality assurance process and actions taken.

Having stated these five guiding principles, it is now appropriate to look at the effect that the quality assurance processes under discussion (academic audit and satisfaction survey) have had (Table 6). How did Lincoln University fare in terms of these guiding principles?

Table 6 – Use of Quality Assurance Processes

	Audit (2001 -)	Survey * (2004 -)
Student Input	- Limited role in internal self-review activity - Met with academic auditors (10)	- Input into survey design (unstructured interviews) - Completed survey evaluations (180)
Leadership	- Responsibility for academic audit with Deputy Vice-Chancellor - mandatory nature means that audit is embedded into academic quality framework	- Responsibility for survey with Deputy Vice-Chancellor - Not totally embedded into academic quality framework
Academic buy-in	- Major participants in self review activity and met with auditors - Academic staff not totally comfortable with the methodology	- Survey administered by management, limited buy-in from academic staff - Academic staff helped but often not totally comfortable with the methodology
Triangulate	- Auditors are able to draw on wide experience - Interviews (with students, staff and externals) as well as a paper audit of process	- Able to interpret results alongside evaluations, focus groups, graduate surveys, academic audit etc.
Feedback	- Wide internal communication of report and follow-up action e.g. web, various committees, newsletters - Report publicly available - AUQA Good Practice Database	- Wide internal communication of report and follow-up action - Hard to communicate with students, who are a transient population

* reporting on the Survey incorporates follow-up to the unstructured interviews

Conclusion

All feedback on academic processes and student satisfaction of their study experience is invaluable to an institution. Feedback that is correctly gathered, interpreted, reported back and acted upon is a rich resource.

This paper has drawn on three different quality assurance processes and demonstrated that postgraduate students want to be supported at all levels. The academic audit process provides scrutiny on the total postgraduate experience and provides recommendations spread equally across management, supervision and support. Student feedback shows that students perceive there is an opportunity for improved support in areas of “need” (computers, library and workspace) as well as in areas of “want” (social space, peer support, student culture and study experience).

A survey or an audit report alone will not lead to improvements. A critical challenge is how the feedback in an auditor’s report or a survey report is used to provide appropriate university structures, management oversight and support. In using the feedback it is essential that students and academic staff are involved and have a sense of ownership and that there is clear leadership from the top. It is essential that the results of any one piece of feedback are not looked at in isolation and that a multi-method approach is used wherever possible. Finally, the information must be used to improve the quality of the postgraduate education experience.

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