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**A critical systems view of quality assurance in
New Zealand universities**

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Abstract

The present study uses a critical systems approach to explore quality assurance in New Zealand universities. It combines information from the international and New Zealand literature with findings from a case study university to investigate perceptions of quality and quality assurance at different levels of the New Zealand university system. The research shows that existing approaches to quality assurance have not followed the principles of quality management to improve the core productive enterprise of the organisation. Instead, the approaches have been advanced in agencies outside universities to the point where they now exist in and of themselves, and for purposes that are no longer transparent to those involved or affected by them.

The research addresses a perceived gap in terms of defining academic quality in a manner that acknowledges the purposes of universities and their complexity. Current approaches to quality assurance emphasise financial and activity-based accountability which arguably have little to do with improving the quality of teaching, learning and research. By shifting the focus from 'defining quality' to articulating the relationship between quality assurance, accountability and quality improvement, standardised approaches such as audit, accreditation and performance reporting can be incorporated alongside the more flexible and adaptive approaches required for the improvement of teaching, learning and research within universities.

Insights regarding a clearer pathway for the application of quality assurance in New Zealand universities are outlined. Main issues to be addressed if the quality assurance system is to be improved are related to its purposes, roles and functions, evaluation methodologies and terminology. In particular, there is a need for explicit acknowledgment of the essential role played by the discipline, and the functions of universities and their staff must be better articulated and understood. Improvement of the quality assurance system is also reliant on acceptance of the work already undertaken and its 'messiness'. Improving teaching, learning and research is not a linear, standardised or tidy business. It is a complex process of developing individual and collective capabilities, taking risks, learning from failure and striving to continuously extend success.

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Abbreviations

AUQA	Australian Universities Quality Agency
CUAP	Committee on University Academic Programmes
CST	Critical Systems Thinking
MoE	Ministry of Education
NPM	New Public Management
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
NZUAAU	New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit
NZVCC	New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PBRF	Performance Based Research Fund
QAB	Quality Assurance Body
STEP	Statement of Tertiary Education Priorities
TEAC	Tertiary Education Advisory Commission
TEC	Tertiary Education Commission
TEO	Tertiary Education Organisation
TES	Tertiary Education Strategy
TQM	Total Quality Management
TSI	Total Systems Intervention
VSM	Viable Systems Modelling