

Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics Quality

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Academic Audit

Summary Report

The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
(December 2006)



INTRODUCTION:

This is the report of the second full academic quality audit of The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand which was conducted over five (5) days from Monday 04 December to Friday 08 December 2006. The NZ Polytechnic Programmes Committee (later ITP Quality) conducted the first such full audit in 2002 and, as a result, the Polytechnic was awarded quality assured status for four (4) years from November 2002. A single corrective action, considered to be of low risk to student learning, was advised and, likewise, a single recommendation for the consideration of the Polytechnic was made.

ITP Quality Evaluators, Judy Hellstrom and Don Griffin undertook the Mid-Term Quality Review two years later and reported their findings in their report dated 21 February 2005. They made no recommendations to the Polytechnic. On the basis of the Review the ITP Quality Board confirmed that the ITP was using effective internal audit and review processes to help maintain academic quality consistent with their Quality Assured Status.

The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand enrolls more students than any other ITP in the country, with an anticipated achievement of 7,950 EFTS this year. It is the only ITP in this country to specialise in open and distance education. The Polytechnic's core mode of "distance" delivery involves providing resources and making support available to learners in their own place or location. Their approach to "open" learning focuses on the provision of a high degree of open access, allowing students to study in their own time and place, providing choices about points of exit and entry, and offering a wide range of learning options. The Polytechnic has a national mandate and fulfils an important part of the network of ITP provision by providing learners with an alternative to attendance-based study. Student responses in the 2005 and 2006 annual surveys (undertaken by Colmar Brunton) emphasised convenience and flexibility of study as the main reasons for studying with The Open Polytechnic. Only 8% (rising to 15% in the 2006 survey) cited, as their **main** reason for choosing The Open Polytechnic, the non-availability of their desired courses locally.

Based on 2005 data, student enrolments are distributed across the total programme portfolio as follows:

- Degrees (12.7%); Graduate Certificates / Diploma (0.5%) and Local Diplomas (10.4%) 24%
- National Diplomas 14%
- National Certificates 23%
- Local Certificates 4%
- Short Awards (less than 40 credits) 2%
- Non-awards 6%
- Other 0.1%
- LifeWorks 27%

International students are in the main enrolled in the New Zealand Diploma in Business where there are 43 EFTS. The Polytechnic has had a minimal involvement in Adult and Community Education (ACE) and currently is not deploying its 2006 ACE allocation. Accordingly, the Audit Team was not able to include any ACE courses in the audit sample or report specifically against the ACE Quality Assurance Arrangements.

Many programmes available through the Open Polytechnic have practical and / or work experience requirements and these learning opportunities are provided in a variety of ways in collaboration with other providers, notably ITPs, Wananga, Universities and Industry Training Organisations. A large proportion of Open Polytechnic students are concurrently in employment and their own workplace provides the greatest opportunity of all for them to apply and relate new concepts to meaningful situations.

LifeWorks has proven to be a highly successful foundation level programme that operates out of premises in Wellington CBD. Because of the volume of students requiring tertiary education at this level the success of the programme has created a short-term imbalance in the Polytechnic's portfolio across levels one to seven. This is expected to be self-correcting with LifeWorks providing a smaller proportion of total EFTS in the future than currently.

In addition to the main campus in Waiwhetu and the LifeWorks office in Courtenay Place, The Open Polytechnic maintains two Learning Centres, one in Christchurch and one in Auckland. These two centres assist in the delivery of programmes and, importantly, enable learners, especially from the commercial and Government sectors, to maintain closer contacts with staff.

In 2004 the Polytechnic received the first signals of declining enrolments which called for some short-term interventions. The problem was seen to be an ageing portfolio of programmes that had grown over the years largely undirected by coherent strategies linked to economies of scale and complementarities with the New Zealand network of ITP provision. Late in the same year the Minister of Education appointed a Crown Observer to the Council of The Open Polytechnic. The downturn in demand continued to impact in 2005 but, notwithstanding this, the Polytechnic recorded a surplus of \$1.06 million for the year. Throughout 2005 and, to this point in 2006, the Polytechnic has worked on how it should reconfigure its business so as to contribute most effectively to the learning needs of the workforce and at the same time sustain its own operations.

The Open Polytechnic's Profile 2007 – 2009 summarises the work undertaken to review the projected NZ economic, cultural and social environment over the next three years that are likely to impact on the strategic direction of the Polytechnic. The work has been supported in two stages with funding from the Quality Reinvestment Programme (QRP) and extended to a full appraisal of its current role, its operating model, the future global and national tertiary sector configuration and, from thence, to the identification and testing of alternative business models that could be used by the Open Polytechnic as it plays its part in the network of provision which will emerge from the 2006 tertiary reforms.

As a result of this work the Polytechnic has identified five strategic directions that will determine its strategic objectives through the next triennium.

- 1) To be recognised by their learners for providing accessible, quality learning that builds their skills and competencies and supports improved participation and productivity in the workplace.
- 2) To be recognised nationally and internationally for the quality and relevance of what is delivered, employing global best practice in distance learning pedagogy, and using student-relevant modes and technologies in delivery that support accessibility.
- 3) To enable Maori learners to build skills and competencies and increase participation and productivity in the workplace by using the Polytechnic's strengths in distance learning and working in partnership with Maori.
- 4) To enable Pasifika learners to build skills and competencies and increase participation and productivity in the workplace by using the Polytechnic's strengths in distance learning and developing Pasifika partnerships.
- 5) To produce the greatest practicable value from the organisation, for the Crown and other stakeholders, by governing, managing and continuously developing the capability of the organisation on a sustainable basis.

Funding from the QRP has enabled the Polytechnic to implement six projects which have resulted in the development of a new business model showing a significant change in the ways in which the Polytechnic will do business in the next triennium. These plans are currently being discussed with the Tertiary Education Commission.

At the time of the Audit the Polytechnic was in possession of advice from the Crown Observer that his appointment would be formally withdrawn by the Minister sometime in the next three months. Meantime, the Crown Observer is not attending further meetings of either the Council or Audit and Finance Committee and has not done so since March 2006.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

The second full audit of The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand by ITP Quality was conducted over 5 days in early December 2006. This followed a successful full audit in 2002 and an equally successful and confirmatory mid-term review of the Polytechnic's quality systems in February 2005. As a result of the second full audit the Audit Team has advised the Board of ITP Quality that, in their view, the Polytechnic continues to meet all twelve (12) of the ITP New Zealand Academic Quality Standards and, accordingly, their quality assured status should be extended for a further four (4) years. The Audit Team did not identify the need for any corrective actions and made eight (8) recommendations for consideration by the Polytechnic.

The success of an institution dedicated to open and distance learning is very dependent on the design and delivery of learning materials and the support given to student studying in their own place and location. In the view of the Audit Team the Open Polytechnic is performing commendably in the design and delivery of learning materials and, equally, provides a range of well resourced and effective support mechanisms for students.

The Audit Team identified eleven (11) examples of good practice and outstanding among these are those relating to delivery and student support.

The Polytechnic has a strong history of learning materials development and has invested significant resources in establishing a Design and Development Centre (DDC) that is one of the strongest of its type in New Zealand. The sector-wide adoption of digital communication technologies for e-learning has seen the creation of an additional E-Learning Unit under the Emerging Business Directorate which is working in partnership with the DDC and engaging in a number of externally funded e-learning development projects. These projects offer a strong future direction for the design of courses at the Polytechnic through the creation of resources, that can be reused, and processes and training to enable their effective use by instructional design staff and teaching Faculty. The Audit Team saw this direction being driven by well researched strategies for the future of the Polytechnic as an integral part of the network of tertiary provision in this country.

The eight recommendations made are in the main concerned with further improvements to policies and procedures already operating satisfactorily. Possibly the most significant recommendation relates to the re-design of the quality management system. The Polytechnic's quality management system is available electronically on "MANAGE" where may be found the formal high-level quality systems documentation. Guidelines, forms and other process information used for work activities are available on the intranet "TOPIC".

The Audit Team found that in some operational areas quality outcomes are at risk because of a lack of well-defined procedures and person responsibilities and, further, a number of instances wherein there is a lack of consistency between MANAGE and TOPIC. The Polytechnic has recognised these weaknesses and is currently engaged in a project to re-configure MANAGE solely as a policy framework and capture the detail of all procedures, guidelines and other related documentation within TOPIC. The Audit Team strongly supports this initiative but has recommended that as existing procedures are refined, and any new procedures developed, this is done from the policy level down to ensure that a logical match is achieved.

The Audit Team conclude that, in their view, The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand continues to meet all twelve (12) of the ITP New Zealand Academic Quality Standards and, accordingly, the Audit Team recommend that ITP Quality award quality assured status for a further four (4) years.

Audit Team (24 January 2007)

ITP Quality Board decision (12 February 2007):

That The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand be awarded Quality Assured Status for a further four years.