

# AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES QUALITY AGENCY

Report of an Audit of  
University of South Australia

October 2009

## 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1.1 *Audit Findings*

The scope for the 2009 audit of the University of South Australia (UniSA) is the two themes of 'Building workforce capacity to improve teaching and learning and enhance research performance' and 'Internationalisation', together with the follow-up of selected recommendations from the 2004 AUQA Audit Report. In addition this Report includes comments on the University's compliance with the MCEETYA *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes*, other external reference points and on academic standards and benchmarking.

AUQA's findings are contained in sections 2 to 4. A selection of data that support the findings is provided in section 5. Information on the conduct of the audit is contained in Appendix A.

#### 1.1.1 Main Points

The Portfolio states that UniSA has achieved much since 1991 and AUQA agrees. The University sees the implementation of strategies directed at recruiting, retaining and developing productive, well-rounded research-active academic staff as its principal means for securing improved outcomes in teaching and learning and in research and research education. Given the significance of staffing policies and practices to the achievement of the University's aspirations, a theme that encompasses workforce planning is therefore a natural choice. Likewise the theme of internationalisation is particularly pertinent for a university with a substantial presence offshore and expanding levels of international activity onshore.

The strategy paper *New Horizons* provides a clear direction for the UniSA community to move forward and outlines concisely how a significant repositioning of the University might be secured. The paper focuses on building a strong research presence and embracing student-engaged learning whilst still maintaining UniSA's strong commitment to values of social justice, equity and engagement. These key priorities are reflected in the Corporate Plans 2008–2010 and 2009–2011. *New Horizons* enjoys widespread support and is favourably referred to by internal stakeholders, who praised it for its inclusivity and for the clarity of direction it offers. The Vice Chancellor, as the principal author of the paper, and other members of the Senior Management Group are actively engaged in interaction with academic and professional staff to advance the agenda that *New Horizons* presents.

From AUQA's perspective, *New Horizons* articulates in an appropriate manner a transformational agenda for UniSA, setting in relative terms a high standard for achievement over a comparatively short period of five years.

The challenges that this represents are not to be understated. To date, UniSA has made considerable progress in securing major improvements in its national standing both in relation to learning and teaching outcomes, and research and research training. For the future, further relative improvements in national standing may prove more demanding in an increasingly competitive higher education sector in which all institutions are seeking to enhance their own positions.

An aspiration centred on building a research-led academic community requires a major shift in a university that traditionally has focused primarily on teaching, education for various professions and the provision of transnational education. The Excellence in Research for Australia initiative (and its antecedent Research Quality Framework) now provides the stimulus, and a greater sense of urgency, for UniSA to move to effect the required change in university culture.

Many of the initiatives already taken or planned by the University are positive and laudable. From AUQA's perspective, however, it is too early to tell if these initiatives will be sufficient to effect the significant repositioning of a large and comparatively young university. There remain considerable challenges in securing sustainable enhancements in its core academic endeavours. Furthermore, it could take years to ascertain the degree to which UniSA's reform initiatives have succeeded. UniSA has a strong sense of direction, is well-organised, effectively governed and managed and is tackling core issues through its focus on workforce reform. It seems well-placed, therefore, to deliver on its ambitious agenda.

### 1.1.2 Matters from Cycle 1 Audit

In reflecting the University's Portfolio, section 2 of this Report contains matters from the Cycle 1 audit as well as some matters of quality improvement.

In summary, the University has developed excellent capabilities in collecting, presenting and analysing a wide variety of data. This includes the creation of a data warehouse to store data and information originating from various university systems such as the Finance, Human Resources, and Student systems. AUQA commends the University on its approach to data-driven, evidence-based change management.

As noted in section 1.1.1, the University has set itself demanding objectives on a national and international scale. Those aspirations have to be tested against demanding benchmarks at the national and international level. In AUQA's view the University has to take a more strategic approach to benchmarking and make a more explicit attempt in setting and assuring academic standards. This will assist in the continuous improvement of programs and outcomes at the school and institute level and within individual disciplines.

On matters of quality processes and quality assurance, the Academic Board has a significant role in determining and monitoring academic standards and seeking ways of maintaining them, including in relation to English Language Proficiency and much more. AUQA recommends that UniSA consider strengthening the role and current standing of the Academic Board in line with the Board's charter.

In following up affirmations and recommendations from the University's 2004 AUQA Audit Report, AUQA concluded that satisfactory progress has been made in responding to the issues raised. One of the 2004 recommendations related to community engagement, including a strategic planning framework for its objectives. AUQA commends UniSA for the substantial improvements that have been achieved on this and in particular the systematic and valued engagement with local communities on the Whyalla Campus and with the City of Salisbury in developing the Mawson Lakes Campus.

### 1.1.3 Theme 1: Building Workforce Capacity to Improve Teaching and Learning and Enhance Research Performance

The topic of this theme is pertinent to the current stage of development of UniSA. It relates to the core academic activities of a university, research, and teaching and learning. AUQA

acknowledges the considerable effort and resources that have gone into supporting and developing these activities in recent years. These initiatives have as their foundation a thorough analysis of the relative weaknesses and strengths of the institution, a review that was followed in 2006 by a series of measures to facilitate improvements in performance and outcomes.

AUQA commends the University on its strategic and comprehensive approach to establishing a research culture across discipline areas generally. Various initiatives designed to build research capacity were adopted such as the creation of highly visible and well-supported chairs, research fellowships, support mechanisms for emerging researchers, and the allocation of resources to attract higher degree by research students.

Equally, the University's new Teaching and Learning Framework and particularly its current vehicle of implementation, STEP2010, are commended by AUQA as an effective process for reinventing teaching and learning, curriculum development and pedagogy. UniSA's strategic approach to implementing support programs designed to enhance the human resources, and learning and teaching capacities of its workforce is also commended, as is the strategic way the University approaches workforce planning and the monitoring of outcomes.

AUQA expresses some concern about the level of understanding at UniSA of the meaning and implications of the teaching-research nexus, a relatively new issue for the University emerging from its strategic goals. Related to this is a need to build significantly on recent developments in identifying a new strategy for research concentrations and to settle relationship issues regarding schools and institutes, a topic that was previously raised in 2004.

Another area where AUQA affirms the University's actions and encourages further improvements is the management and development of sessional staff.

#### 1.1.4 Theme 2: Internationalisation

The University is a significant player on the international higher education landscape. It has been in the lead group of Australian universities active in transnational education. With the advent of New Horizons, UniSA is in the process of a major repositioning of its international priorities. A fresh approach to internationalisation places more emphasis on activities that are based in or originate from Adelaide and less on transnational education. There is currently a substantial teach-out program of many transnational programs, but some of these will not be concluded until 2016.

Given the changes in strategic direction as articulated in New Horizons, including in relation to internationalisation, AUQA recommends that UniSA provide a clearer definition of its revised internationalisation agenda and improve internal communication and understanding of its objectives, priorities and core activities.

UniSA is commended for the quality of planning, implementation, overall leadership and management of the decision to substantially withdraw from transnational education and for the manner in which it is handling the ensuing teach-out process. This latter point reinforces the sensitive manner in which UniSA seeks to engage with students. AUQA commends UniSA on the systems and processes in place that facilitate this supportive climate.

Notwithstanding these comments, from both the overseas and the Audit Visit in Australia the Panel noted the absence of a consistent approach to informing students of actions taken as a result of student survey feedback. AUQA recommends that this be rectified.

The audit comprised visits to four transnational program locations. AUQA acknowledges that excellent working relationships are in place at each location. There is some concern expressed in the Report regarding mechanisms in place for assessing actual English language proficiency of students in an academic setting. AUQA affirms UniSA's intended actions to strengthen processes and support in this area. Similarly, AUQA affirms UniSA's extensive measures on academic integrity and encourages continuing vigilance.

#### 1.1.5 National Protocols

The *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes* require all universities to meet a range of criteria, in particular nationally prescribed criteria A1 to A10 for higher education providers and D1 to D5 specifically for universities. At AUQA's request, the University provided a self-assessment against the Protocols, as part of a requirement in the arrangements for the 2009 audits.

On the evidence considered by the Panel, the University of South Australia satisfies the criteria in the National Protocols.

#### 1.1.6 Other External Reference Points

The University refers to the following documents in its Portfolio documentation:

- Australian Qualifications Framework
- Higher Education Support Act 2003 (Cwlth) (HESA) and guidelines
- DEST 2007, National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students (the National Code) under the Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 (Cwlth)
- UNESCO/OECD 2005, Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education
- AUQA 2009, Good Practice Principles for English Language Competence.

The audit did not identify any matters of concern regarding the University's compliance with these external reference points.

### 1.2 ***Institutional Context***

The University of South Australia was established in 1991. It was formed as a result of an amalgamation of the South Australian College of Advanced Education and the South Australian Institute of Technology. Thus the University has its origins in education for industry and the professions. Its Act of establishment combines a strong social mission with a commitment to excellence and community engagement.

UniSA is a multi-campus university and has campuses at City West and City East in Adelaide, Mawson Lakes and Magill within metropolitan Adelaide, plus a campus at Whyalla and a regional centre at Mt Gambier.

The University has four academic divisions: Business; Education, Arts and Social Sciences; Health Sciences; and Information Technology, Engineering and the Environment. Each of the academic divisions is headed by a pro vice chancellor (PVC). The divisions comprise a number of schools. The Whyalla Campus and the regional centre at Mt Gambier constitute the Centre for Regional Engagement. There are 18 schools in total. The five University-wide coordinating portfolios are headed by the DVC (Deputy Vice Chancellor): Academic, DVC: Research and Innovation, PVC: Strategy and Planning, PVC: International and Development and an Executive Director: Finance

and Resources. The Vice Chancellor chairs the Senior Management Group which includes the heads of the academic divisions and of the coordinating portfolios.

The University is part of the Australian Technology Network of universities comprising: RMIT University, University of Technology, Sydney, Queensland University of Technology and Curtin University of Technology.

#### Selected UniSA statistics, 2004–2008

Item		2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Number of students	<b>Total</b>	32,951	32,266	33,680	34,603	<b>36,176</b>
	<b>Commencing</b>	12,025	12,232	13,519	13,417	<b>14,085</b>
Student load (EFTSL)	<b>Total</b>	22,126	21,378	22,535	23,302	<b>24,443</b>
	<b>Undergraduate</b>	17,229	16,958	17,984	18,621	<b>19,580</b>
	<b>Postgraduate</b>	4,897	4,420	4,551	4,681	<b>4,863</b>
Student load by funding source (EFTSL)	<b>Commonwealth operating grant</b>	14,294	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	<b>n.a.</b>
	<b>Commonwealth grant scheme</b>	n.a.	14,024	14,756	14,512	<b>14,798</b>
	<b>Commonwealth Research Training Scheme</b>	392	425	432	466	<b>490</b>
	<b>Domestic fee paying</b>	631	703	663	678	<b>507</b>
	<b>International onshore</b>	2,533	3,037	3,317	3,505	<b>3,844</b>
	<b>Transnational</b>	4,265	3,185	3,364	4,135	<b>4,795</b>
	<b>Other</b>	11	3	4	6	<b>8</b>
Research income	<b>DEEWR categories 1–4 (\$m)</b>	27	30	40	46	<b>55p</b>
Staff (FTE)	<b>Total</b>	2,086	2,103	2,162	2,266	<b>2,396</b>
	<b>Academic</b>	891	920	956	1,010	<b>1,043</b>
	<b>Professional*</b>	1,195	1,183	1,205	1,256	<b>1,353</b>
	<b>Teaching and research</b>	716	714	753	778	<b>802</b>
	<b>Research only</b>	183	210	213	253	<b>284</b>
	<b>Other function</b>	1,187	1,179	1,196	1,235	<b>1,309</b>

Source: PF p13, extract from Table 1.1.

*\*Professional staff at UniSA are called general staff or non-academic staff at some other universities in Australia.*

Key performance indicator results for UniSA for the period 2004 to 2008 are in data item 5.1.

#### 1.2.1 Strategic Context

The AUQA audit of an institution is guided by the objectives that an institution sets for itself. The purpose of an institution is defined by its Act and governing body. In May 2008 the University of South Australia Council adopted the new statement of Vision, Mission and Values which, it says, retains the enduring values of the institution but signals a clear, contemporary and future-oriented vision for the University's role in the life of regional, national and global communities.

<b>Vision</b>	UniSA will be a leading contributor to Australia having the best higher education system in the world, supporting the world's best educated and most innovative, cohesive and sustainable society.
<b>Mission</b>	UniSA educates professionals and citizens to the highest standards; creates and disseminates knowledge; and engages with our communities to address the major issues of our time.
<b>Values</b>	
<i>Scholarship</i>	UniSA promotes and sustains open intellectual enquiry characterised by high standards of ethics and integrity. Academic rigour, excellence and relevance underpin our actions in research and its application, in teaching and learning and in engagement with our communities.
<i>Engagement</i>	UniSA's teaching and research connect strongly with the issues of our local, national and international stakeholders—students, alumni, staff, partners, professions, government, industry, academic peers and community groups.
<i>Social justice</i>	UniSA gives effect to reconciliation with Indigenous Australians and builds social cohesion by achieving equitable educational access and outcomes across our diverse student community, through research that aims to improve the quality of life and by acting responsibly as a corporate citizen.
<i>Sustainability</i>	UniSA contributes to environmentally, economically, socially and culturally sustainable development, and we aim to reduce our own environmental impact.
<i>Innovation</i>	UniSA anticipates change and acts quickly to seize opportunities and solve problems.
<i>Openness</i>	UniSA is outward looking, welcoming diversity and the wide range of perspectives it brings, international in outlook, collaborative, creative, agile and enterprising.

These aspirations and values are congruent with the seven Qualities of a Graduate of the University of South Australia which the University considers to have been a fundamental plank of its Teaching and Learning Framework since 1996:

*A Graduate of the University of South Australia:*

1. operates effectively with and upon a body of knowledge of sufficient depth to begin professional practice
2. is prepared for lifelong learning in pursuit of personal development and excellence in professional practice
3. is an effective problem solver, capable of applying logical, critical and creative thinking to a range of problems
4. can work both autonomously and collaboratively as a professional
5. is committed to ethical action and social responsibility as a professional and as a citizen
6. communicates effectively in professional practice and as a member of the community
7. demonstrates international perspectives as a professional and as a citizen.

The Vice Chancellor's position paper *New Horizons* states that UniSA will be guided by the needs of its students as key stakeholders and that the performance of its people will be critical to its success. The 2009 *New Horizons: A Progress Report* outlines for Council the major priorities and change projects which are critical to UniSA's success in teaching and learning, research, internationalisation and business processes. All these priorities are underpinned by enhancing the capability of staff, and are therefore the focus of theme 1.

As for other Australian universities, the environment in which institutional strategies and priorities are currently being determined is largely shaped by the series of policy announcements relating to the higher education sector made by the Commonwealth Government. In 2008 there was the Cutler Review, *Venturous Australia – Building Strength in Innovation* and early in 2009, the *Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education*. These announcements foreshadowed institutional targets for certain categories of student enrolments, a new research agenda shaped by the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), imminent discussions about the introduction of compacts between each university and the government and a sharper focus on academic standards and internationalisation.

The three Australian universities located in South Australia, UniSA, Flinders University and the University of Adelaide, face similar challenges. While the population base of Adelaide and of South Australia is relatively small and stable, all three universities are said to have plans to grow, to increase their research activity and secure success in the new ERA system, to engage with their communities and to enjoy significant international standing. There is also a small but growing presence of overseas universities in Adelaide.

There is therefore a heightened level of sensitivity about the impact of the AUQA audit and its associated processes. As a consequence, some of the data and strategic information presented to the Audit Panel by UniSA has been treated as being of a commercial-in-confidence nature. This Report seeks to respect the request by the University not to publish material that might reasonably be regarded as commercially sensitive.

### **1.3 Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations**

This Report contains commendations, affirmations and recommendations. A commendation refers to the achievement of a stated goal, or to some plan or activity that has led to, or appears likely to lead to, the achievement of a stated goal, and which in AUQA's view is particularly significant. A recommendation refers to an area in need of attention, whether in respect of approach, deployment or results, which in AUQA's view is particularly significant. Where such matters have already been identified by the University, with evidence, they are termed 'affirmations'. There were no high priority affirmations or recommendations marked as 'urgent' in this Report. It is acknowledged that recommendations in this Audit Report may have resource implications.

The themes for Cycle 2 audits are chosen for their potential risks to institutions and to the higher education sector and are likely also to reflect the institution's own assessment of its developmental and strategic needs. The nature of the findings is influenced by the broad nature of the themes. As for Cycle 1 audits, AUQA aims to assist the University to enhance the quality and standards of its operations.

#### **Commendations**

1. AUQA commends UniSA on the clarity of direction and the manner in which New Horizons has been communicated to engage and inspire staff at all levels in the University. ....11
2. AUQA commends UniSA on the widespread and sophisticated use of management information tools such as data cubes, the development of its business intelligence capabilities and their deployment in initiating and monitoring evidence-based change and improvement. ....12

3. AUQA commends UniSA for the substantial improvements on issues related to community engagement raised in the AUQA Cycle 1 audit. ....16

4. AUQA commends UniSA for the strategic and comprehensive approach it has taken to instil a greater level of commitment to a research culture across discipline areas. ....20

5. AUQA commends UniSA on its approach to addressing teaching and learning issues since 2005, with the STEP2010 project implementing a process of reinvention of teaching and learning, curriculum development and pedagogy. ....21

6. AUQA commends UniSA for its strategic approach to implementing human resources and learning & teaching support programs and its commitment to providing access to them. ....25

7. AUQA commends UniSA for its strategic use of resources in support of workforce planning initiatives including changed responsibilities of professional staff in schools. ....27

8. AUQA commends UniSA for the quality of the planning and implementation of its decision to withdraw from the substantial provision of transnational education programs and for the overall leadership and management of the associated teach-out processes. ....33

9. AUQA commends UniSA on the systems and processes in place, both onshore and offshore, for dealing with student issues. ....34

**Affirmations**

1. AUQA affirms UniSA in its attempts to address the implications of the teaching-research nexus, including workload measures and the workload implications of the implementation of the Teaching and Learning Framework (STEP2010) and the new research concentrations strategy (ReNEW). ....22

2. AUQA affirms UniSA’s recognition of the need for more consistent management of the experience of newly appointed academic staff, in particular sessional staff. ....26

3. AUQA affirms UniSA in its programs and activities to enhance the international dimension of the student experience. ....31

4. AUQA affirms UniSA in its policy approach to academic integrity and encourages continued vigilance across all academic programs irrespective of location. ....39

5. AUQA affirms UniSA’s recognition that English language proficiency for students is a significant and immediate issue that needs to be addressed, and supports timely conclusion of the current discussion about the implementation of the English language proficiency project, including the testing of student proficiency and where required the provision of additional support and guidance for students. ....40

**Recommendations**

1. AUQA recommends that UniSA take a more strategic approach to benchmarking and the validation of its academic standards to facilitate continuous improvement at school and institute levels and within disciplines. ....13

- 2. AUQA recommends that UniSA consider strengthening the role and standing of the Academic Board primarily in relation to academic standards and quality assurance in line with its charter.....14
- 3. AUQA recommends that UniSA provide a clearer definition of its revised internationalisation agenda and improve internal communication and understanding of its objectives, priorities and core activities. ....29
- 4. AUQA recommends that UniSA design and implement a consistent mechanism, including in relation to transnational education programs, that enables students to be informed more productively of actions taken as a result of student feedback and student surveys and the outcomes of those actions.....35