



Australian Government
Financial Reporting Council



Australian Government
Auditing and Assurance Standards Board

AUDIT QUALITY IN AUSTRALIA:

THE PERSPECTIVE OF AUDIT COMMITTEE CHAIRS

SEPTEMBER 2018

The Financial Reporting Council

The Financial Reporting Council (FRC) is responsible for overseeing the effectiveness of the financial reporting system in Australia. Its key functions include the oversight of the accounting and auditing standards setting processes for the public and private sectors, providing strategic advice in relation to the quality of audits conducted by Australian auditors, and advising the Minister on these and related matters to the extent that they affect the financial reporting system in Australia.

The FRC monitors the development of international accounting and auditing standards, works to further the development of a single set of accounting and auditing standards for world-wide use and promotes the adoption of these standards. It is a statutory body under Part 12 of the *Australian Securities and Investments Commission Act 2001* (the ASIC Act).

The Auditing and Assurance Standards Board

The Auditing and Assurance Standards Board (AUASB) is an independent, non-corporate Commonwealth entity of the Australian Government, responsible for developing, issuing and maintaining auditing and assurance standards.

Sound public interest-oriented auditing and assurance standards are necessary to reinforce the credibility of the auditing and assurance processes for those who use financial and other information. The AUASB standards are legally enforceable for audits or reviews of financial reports required under the *Corporations Act 2001*.

The AUASB's role extends to liaison with other standards setters and participation in standard-setting initiatives.

Enquiries

Auditing and Assurance Standards Board
PO Box 204, Collins Street West, Victoria 8007, AUSTRALIA
Tel +61 3 8080 7400 | enquiries@auasb.gov.au | www.auasb.gov.au

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Introduction

The Financial Reporting Council (FRC) is the peak body responsible for overseeing the effectiveness of the financial reporting system in Australia to which audit quality is integral. Accordingly, the FRC has a legislative mandate to monitor the quality of audits carried out by Australian auditors.

Audit quality can be challenging to define, measure and quantify.

The FRC is engaging with users of financial reports to better understand their views on audit quality, and to help identify if any actions are required.

Audit Committee Chairs (ACCs) play an integral role in the oversight of financial reporting and the performance and quality of their external auditor. In recognition of this, the FRC – in conjunction with the AUASB – asked ACCs to participate in a survey designed to gather their perspectives on audit quality. The survey results aim to better inform the FRC and help identify any appropriate actions.

This report details the results of this survey, as well as further insights on ACCs' perspectives on audit quality. This report aims to assist audit committees and auditors as they work together with the goal of improving audit quality, and ultimately the integrity of financial reporting.

We thank the ACCs who completed this survey and for generously sharing their views and experiences.

Survey participants

Ninety-one ASX top 300-listed company ACCs completed this survey and provided comments to share further insights into the factors they considered when assessing their auditor.

This enabled us to capture insights into why they rated audit quality as it is, best practice examples, as well as areas for improvement.

Methodology

The UK Financial Reporting Council conducts a regular ACC Survey. In order to achieve a direct comparison to UK ACCs' perceptions of audit quality, we elected to replicate specific questions used in their survey.

This is the first survey of this type that we have conducted in Australia. In light of the current focus on audit quality, it is our intention to conduct them periodically as a means of continuing to track the views of ACCs.

Audit Committee Chairs play an integral role in the oversight of financial reporting and the performance and quality of their external auditors.

91 ASX top 300-listed company ACCs completed this survey, and provided comments to share further insights into the factors they considered when assessing their auditor.

Executive summary

To assess the overall views of ACCs, we asked the following question:

Taking all aspects of their service into consideration, which of the following best describes your overall view of your external auditor?

Overall, ACCs are very satisfied with the quality of their external auditor with 92% rating them 'Above average' or 'Excellent' (Figure 1).

Overall, ACCs are very satisfied with the quality of their external auditor.

The feedback received on the other questions we asked ACCs was consistent with this overall view.

We also asked ACCs for their views on the important features of a quality audit, and the response was:

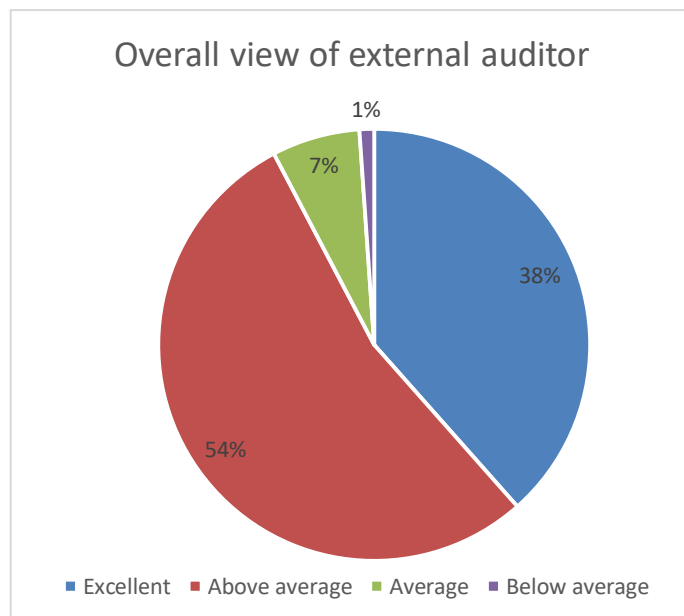


Figure 1 – Overall view of the external auditor.

Important features of a quality audit

- ☒ Quality of team (including specialists) – experienced, relevant industry experience, and strong technical skills
- ☒ Good, frequent, and open communication
- ☒ Evidence of professional scepticism and independent mind-set
- ☒ An understanding of the business and the industry
- ☒ Skills, experience and mind-set of partner
- ☒ Understanding of risks
- ☒ Constructive challenge of management
- ☒ Focus on reliability of financial statements

Additionally, ACCs gave the following feedback not directly related to audit quality, focused on activities auditors could consider doing more of, or less of.

Response to question: **Things auditors could do more of**

- Further innovation and use of technology including data analytics.
- Explore future and emerging risks.
- More communication between meetings.
- Benchmarking and best practice insights.
- Insights into risk culture and capability of our people.
- Demonstrate appropriate distance from management.

Response to question: **Things auditors could do less of**

- Long, verbose reporting.
- Too close to management.
- Basic manual testing instead of using technology.
- Processes that add little value.

Overall results compared with that of UK Audit Committee Chairs

Figure 2 compares the results with those of the UK (2016) on six questions regarding specific aspects of audit quality. ACCs were asked to rate their auditor on a 1-7 scale (where 1 would suggest a low level of satisfaction, 4 is as expected, and 7 a high level of satisfaction).

The results demonstrate that the views of ACCs in the UK and Australia are very similar, in that both are very satisfied with their auditor (Figure 2).

The following section of this report provides a comparison of the results of the feedback from the ASX 300 ACCs with the 2016 United Kingdom Survey results, also disaggregated by the ASX top 100, 101-200 and 201-300. A sample of comments we received are included to provide insights into why ACCs rated their auditor that way.

Comparison of mean scores per question, Australia to United Kingdom		
1. How satisfied were you with your external auditor's audit focus, approach and risk assessment?	Australia	5.90/7
	United Kingdom	6.10/7
2. How satisfied were you that your external auditor has adopted an appropriate approach to quality management for your engagement?	Australia	5.86/7
	United Kingdom	6.00/7
3. How satisfied were you with the way in which your external auditor demonstrated that they had adopted an appropriate mind-set and culture, and acted with appropriate professional skepticism?	Australia	5.92/7
	United Kingdom	6.10/7
4. To what degree did the external auditor exhibit independence and objectivity?	Australia	6.04/7
	United Kingdom	6.30/7
5. How satisfied were you with the communication/interaction between the external auditor and the Audit Committee?	Australia	6.01/7
	United Kingdom	6.30/7
6. How satisfied were you with the extent the external auditor demonstrated innovation in their audit approach and methodology used? (Not asked in UK 2016 survey)	Australia	5.08/7

Figure 2 – Comparing Australian ACCs' views with those in the UK (2016).

Q1: How satisfied were you with your external auditor's focus, approach and risk assessment?

OUR ASSESSMENT

ACCs are satisfied with their auditor's focus, approach and risk assessment.

Risk assessment is fundamental to performing an audit focused on the right things and the foundation of a high quality audit.

Good risk assessment is based on a deep understanding of the business and its environment, its control environment and financial reporting framework.

Good risk assessment requires auditors, management and audit committees, to work together and challenge each other to ensure risk assessment is robust.

SURVEY RESULTS

Overall compared with the UK

Australia	5.90 /7
United Kingdom	6.10/7

ASX 300 Responses

ASX 100	6.09/7
ASX 101-200	5.94/7
ASX 201-300	5.59/7

Risk assessment is fundamental to performing an audit focused on the right things and is the foundation of a high quality audit.

What we heard: Audit Committee Chair commentary

➤ Understanding of the business

"Very considered approach after broad consultation across the business and with the board. Also brings a commercial lens to their approach."

"The audit focus, approach and risk assessment appear appropriate and demonstrates a good understanding of the business."

"Their approach was tailored to the important risk / judgement areas ... "

➤ Frequent and open communication

"Very good communication between the audit firm and the audit committee and board to ensure that the focus, approach and risk assessment are appropriate for our organisation."

"Identifies any issues early."

"Very good communication of plan and risk focus from the outset."

"Strong open communication throughout the year ... means I am very happy with the auditor focus, approach and risk assessment".

➤ Challenging management

"The Audit Committee has worked with both management and the auditor to ensure that each knows what the Committee expects the auditor to be challenging in their assessment of risk."

➤ Observations for improvement

One ACC commented that their auditor "appears to think they work for management".

"Focus is primarily financial risk. Could add value by looking beyond just financial risk".

Q2: How satisfied were you that your external auditor has adopted an appropriate approach to quality management for your engagement?

OUR ASSESSMENT

ACCs are satisfied with their auditor's approach to quality management.

Quality management is important and includes the internal processes that the auditor has in place to result in compliance with relevant legislation and high audit quality.

There are extensive legislative requirements in relation to an audit firm's quality management systems, as well as procedures required at the individual audit engagement level.

Specific procedures at the individual audit engagement level include supervision and review of the team by the Engagement Partner, and for listed entities the involvement of an Engagement Quality Review Partner.

SURVEY RESULTS

Overall compared with the UK

Australia	5.86/7
United Kingdom	6.00/7

ASX 300 Responses

ASX 100	6.06/7
ASX 101 -200	5.91/7
ASX 201 - 300	5.50/7

Quality management is important and includes the internal processes that the auditor has in place to result in compliance with relevant legislation and high audit quality.

What we heard: Audit Committee Chair commentary

➤ Quality management processes

"... it is clear that there is a level of internal quality review by the firm."

"Very good and transparent QA process within the audit firm."

"Auditor appears to be careful about following requirements of the auditing standards."

"Expressed in serious tones but detail really behind the scenes."

"I felt the auditor made good use of the broader skills and technology within its firm to enhance the overall audit for us."

"I don't see their audit papers but from discussions on their approach, the conversations with key individuals, the breadth of the business audited and the depth with which they execute their engagement, I'm comfortable."

"I see a significant advantage in having the same manager and partner on the assignment for consecutive years. It gives them much stronger understanding of the company's operations."

➤ Role of the Engagement Quality Review Partner

A few ACCs highlighted the Engagement Quality Review Partner (EQRP) and their importance on quality management:

"Quality control partner appointed who was highly experienced."

Q3: How satisfied were you with the way in which your external auditor demonstrated that they had adopted an appropriate mind-set and culture, and acted with appropriate professional scepticism?

OUR ASSESSMENT

ACCs are satisfied with the professional scepticism demonstrated by their auditor.

Professional scepticism is an attitude that includes a questioning mind and being alert to possible misstatements.

Auditors are explicitly required by the Auditing Standards to use professional scepticism throughout the performance of the audit. It underpins audit quality.

Auditors should ensure they demonstrate their professional scepticism, as this gives audit committees confidence in the robustness of the audit. Ways auditors can demonstrate this include communicating to audit committees how they have challenged risk assessment, key assumptions in estimates, accounting policies used, and considered alternatives etc.

Auditors can also demonstrate their professional scepticism when reporting key audit matters in the auditor's report.

SURVEY RESULTS

Overall compared with the UK

Australia	5.92/7
United Kingdom	6.10/7

ASX 300 Responses

ASX 100	6.06/7
ASX 101-200	5.97/7
ASX 201-300	5.64/7

Professional scepticism is an attitude that includes a questioning mind and being alert to possible misstatements.

What we heard: Audit Committee Chairs commentary Chair commentary

➤ Demonstrate professional scepticism

"Regularly presents evidence of challenge to the views of management."

"Good communication including when they have sought specialist advice."

"Demonstrated appropriate constructive challenge to management."

"We gave feedback to our auditor that the AC could not tell if the auditor had been sceptical or had considered / held alternate views. The auditor was encouraged to communicate these either verbally or in writing. The auditor has accepted this 'invitation' and has improved their communication to us."

"We have encouraged our auditor to communicate matters and the auditor has improved in this area."

➤ Observations for improvement

"...could have been more proactive in bringing issues from its global practice to the attention of the Audit Committee".

"Enough scepticism yes, but a higher degree of scepticism would be better. That is true for audit committee members also."

Q4: To what degree did the external auditor exhibit independence and objectivity?

OUR ASSESSMENT

This was the highest rated question by the ACCs. Independence and objectivity was identified as one of the most important features of a quality audit by ACCs.

Objectivity and independence of the auditor underpins the integrity of the independent auditor's report, and the confidence it provides to the market.

The Auditing Standards, ethical requirements and the *Corporations Act 2001* have strict rules to protect auditor's independence, including the prohibition of some types of other services to audit clients. Audit committees have a responsibility to oversee their auditor's independence.

SURVEY RESULTS

Overall compared with the UK

Australia	6.04/7
United Kingdom	6.30/7

ASX 300 Responses

ASX 100	6.21/7
ASX 101-200	6.23/7
ASX 201-300	5.57/7

Independence and objectivity was identified as one of the most important features of a quality audit by ACCs.

What we heard: Audit Committee Chair commentary

➤ Independence and objectivity in mind set

"Not afraid to raise areas where they had a different perspective."

"Clearly showed independence in bringing any issues."

"A two partner model enables greater objectivity and breadth of challenge."

"Independence and objectivity is addressed by both the auditor and the company and I have no concerns..."

➤ Non-audit services

"High level of focus on non-audit services, with the auditor checking in with me that I was aware of and had approved use of the firm for non-audit services."

"Companies often prefer the auditor to undertake some assignments because of their knowledge of the company. Independence has and always will be a grey area ... auditing your own work is crystal clear. Others such as supply chain reviews, strategic planning or leadership coaching are not always so clear. There is also the question of public perception ..."

"We have separated and outsourced non-audit accounting services to other firms."

➤ Observations for improvement

"Too close to management"

"I would encourage external audit firms to look for areas of non-audit services which in turn assist with audit quality – for example IT assurance or risk work, rather than consulting which may challenge independence."

Q5: How satisfied were you with the communication / interaction between the external auditor and the Audit Committee?

OUR ASSESSMENT

ACCs are satisfied with the communication / interactions with their auditor.

Audit committees play an important role in the oversight of the audit. To do this communication between the auditor and the audit committee is integral.

ACCs want proactive communication of issues as they emerge. They also want strong written and verbal communication in relation to these issues.

Whilst many ACCs said the communication was good, some said they want more. Some ACCs encouraged their auditor to meet more frequently, including out of reporting season.

Some ACCs referred to the value provided by the one-on-one meetings with their auditor.

SURVEY RESULTS

Overall compared with the UK

Australia	6.01/7
United Kingdom	6.30/7

ASX 300 Responses

ASX 100	6.15/7
ASX 101-200	6.06/7
ASX 201-300	5.68/7

ACCs want proactive communication of issues as they emerge.

What we heard: Audit Committee Chair commentary

➤ Clear, high quality communication

"Yes, always found communication to be clear and communicates the auditor's view.

"Proactive about speaking out of cycle of meetings for any emerging issues."

"The auditor provides views on management's estimates and directionally how it compares to the previous period. Both written and oral communication is strong."

"Extremely high quality formal and informal reporting."

"As ACC I have a role to play in ensuring that the communication / integration is of high-quality."

➤ Private sessions with the auditor and ACC

"Always prior to AC meetings I have a discussion with the auditors."

"As Chairman of the audit committee, I always have a separate and independent dialogue with the auditors before each meeting and on every occasion that the need arises. Further the audit committee always has a closed session with the external auditors in the absence of management."

➤ Areas to focus on

"Communications are somewhat stifled by the requirements of what must be communicated."

"My auditor does not provide individual assessments on how conservative or optimistic each of management's material judgements are."

"Does not seek to meet with the ACC prior to audit committee."

Q6: How satisfied were you with the extent to which the external auditor demonstrated innovation in their audit approach and methodology used?

OUR ASSESSMENT

This question received the lowest rating from ACCs which indicates that while satisfied, innovation in the audit is an area where ACCs believe improvement can be made.

Some ACCs said the use of innovation, in particular technology is good, however many commented that whilst it was discussed, and was increasingly being used, they would like to see more.

A common theme was the importance of technology to assist with the effectiveness of the audit, for example providing business intelligence, new insights, streamlining work and identifying trends and outliers.

SURVEY RESULTS

Overall results (not asked in the UK)

Australia 2018	5.08/7
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ASX 300 Responses

ASX 100	5.26/7
ASX 101-200	4.97/7
ASX 201-300	4.73/7

... innovation in the audit is an area where ACCs believe improvement can be made.

What we heard: Audit Committee Chair commentary

➤ Use of technology is good

“Data analytics is used well and increasingly.”

“Very high levels of innovation, especially in data analytics and how technology could not only help the audit but help management and the board.”

“Use of contemporary technology excellent. Utilisation of specialist disciplines within firm also very good.”

“There is a good balance of using data analytics tools in particular without compromising the integrity of the audit process.”

“Auditor using data analytics increasingly across our data. This has helped identify potential issues and enable timely focus. In other boards (for non-ASX 200) I have seen the auditors also do this and intelligently applied it helps audit efficiency (and fees) and has also led to management considering how to better use such analytics themselves.”

➤ They want to see more innovation

“Greater use of data analytics for business intelligence and future proofing.”

“Accountants should use data analytics extensively. They are coming into this century gradually but we train bookkeepers these days rather than accountants.”

“This area needs more focus – data analytics is used, but there is potentially a higher level of innovation available. I would like to see global best practice brought to the table.”

“Auditors are constrained by safety/PI ... There is little reward for innovation but a high risk if you get it wrong.”

2018 Audit Committee Chair survey on perceptions of audit quality in Australia – results by entity type

A. Audit Quality

Q1. How satisfied were you with your external auditor's audit focus, approach and risk assessment?					
entity_type. Please indicate which type of entity you are an Audit Committee Chair of.			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent Cumulative Percent
ASX 100	Valid	7 - High	11	32.4	32.4
		6	17	50.0	82.4
		5	4	11.8	94.1
		4 - As Expected	2	5.9	100.0
		Total	34	100.0	100.0
ASX 101-200	Valid	7 - High	5	15.6	15.6
		6	21	65.6	81.3
		5	5	15.6	96.9
		4 - As Expected	1	3.1	100.0
		Total	32	100.0	100.0
ASX 201-300	Valid	7 - High	5	22.7	22.7
		6	9	40.9	63.6
		5	3	13.6	77.3
		4 - As Expected	4	18.2	95.5
		3	1	4.5	100.0
Other listed	Valid	Total	22	100.0	100.0
		6	1	50.0	50.0
		5	1	50.0	100.0
Other	Valid	Total	2	100.0	100.0
		6	1	100.0	100.0

Q2. How satisfied were you that your external auditor has adopted an appropriate approach to quality management for your engagement?					
entity_type. Please indicate which type of entity you are an Audit Committee Chair of.			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent Cumulative Percent
ASX 100	Valid	7 - High	11	32.4	32.4
		6	16	47.1	79.4
		5	5	14.7	94.1
		4 - As Expected	2	5.9	100.0
		Total	34	100.0	100.0
ASX 101-200	Valid	7 - High	6	18.8	18.8
		6	19	59.4	78.1
		5	5	15.6	93.8
		4 - As Expected	2	6.3	100.0
		Total	32	100.0	100.0
ASX 201-300	Valid	7 - High	4	18.2	18.2
		6	8	36.4	54.5
		5	5	22.7	77.3
		4 - As Expected	5	22.7	100.0
		Total	22	100.0	100.0
Other listed	Valid	6	1	50.0	50.0
		5	1	50.0	100.0
		Total	2	100.0	100.0
Other	Valid	6	1	100.0	100.0

Q3. How satisfied were you with the way in which your external auditor demonstrated that they had adopted an appropriate mind-set and culture, and acted with appropriate professional scepticism?

entity_type. Please indicate which type of entity you are an Audit Committee Chair of.			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
ASX 100	Valid	7 - High	14	41.2	41.2	41.2
		6	13	38.2	38.2	79.4
		5	3	8.8	8.8	88.2
		4 - As Expected	3	8.8	8.8	97.1
		3	1	2.9	2.9	100.0
		Total	34	100.0	100.0	
ASX 101-200	Valid	7 - High	8	25.0	25.0	25.0
		6	15	46.9	46.9	71.9
		5	9	28.1	28.1	100.0
		Total	32	100.0	100.0	
ASX 201-300	Valid	7 - High	6	27.3	27.3	27.3
		6	8	36.4	36.4	63.6
		5	4	18.2	18.2	81.8
		4 - As Expected	3	13.6	13.6	95.5
		2	1	4.5	4.5	100.0
		Total	22	100.0	100.0	
Other listed	Valid	6	2	100.0	100.0	100.0
Other	Valid	6	1	100.0	100.0	100.0

Q4. To what degree did the external auditor exhibit independence and objectivity?

entity_type. Please indicate which type of entity you are an Audit Committee Chair of.			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
ASX 100	Valid	7 - High	17	50.0	50.0	50.0
		6	11	32.4	32.4	82.4
		5	2	5.9	5.9	88.2
		4 - As Expected	4	11.8	11.8	100.0
		Total	34	100.0	100.0	
ASX 101-200	Valid	7 - High	11	34.4	35.5	35.5
		6	16	50.0	51.6	87.1
		5	4	12.5	12.9	100.0
		Total	31	96.9	100.0	
	Missing	System	1	3.1		
	Total		32	100.0		
ASX 201-300	Valid	7 - High	6	27.3	28.6	28.6
		5	3	13.6	14.3	42.9
		6	7	31.8	33.3	76.2
		4 - As Expected	4	18.2	19.0	95.2
		2	1	4.5	4.8	100.0
		Total	21	95.5	100.0	
	Missing	System	1	4.5		
Other listed	Valid	5	2	100.0	100.0	100.0
		7 - High	1	100.0	100.0	100.0

Q5. How satisfied were you with the communication/ interaction between the external auditor and the Audit Committee?					
entity_type. Please indicate which type of entity you are an Audit Committee Chair of.			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent Cumulative Percent
ASX 100	Valid	7 - High	13	38.2	38.2
		6	14	41.2	79.4
		5	6	17.6	97.1
		4 - As Expected	1	2.9	100.0
		Total	34	100.0	100.0
ASX 101-200	Valid	7 - High	9	28.1	28.1
		6	17	53.1	81.3
		5	5	15.6	96.9
		4 - As Expected	1	3.1	100.0
		Total	32	100.0	100.0
ASX 201-300	Valid	7 - High	5	22.7	22.7
		6	11	50.0	72.7
		5	3	13.6	86.4
		4 - As Expected	2	9.1	95.5
		1 - Low	1	4.5	100.0
		Total	22	100.0	100.0
Other listed	Valid	6	2	100.0	100.0
Other	Valid	7 - High	1	100.0	100.0

Q6. How satisfied were you with the extent to which the external auditor demonstrated innovation in their audit approach and methodology used?					
entity_type. Please indicate which type of entity you are an Audit Committee Chair of.			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent Cumulative Percent
ASX 100	Valid	7 - High	5	14.7	14.7
		6	8	23.5	38.2
		5	13	38.2	76.5
		4 - As Expected	7	20.6	97.1
		3	1	2.9	100.0
		Total	34	100.0	100.0
ASX 101-200	Valid	7 - High	3	9.4	9.7
		6	7	21.9	32.3
		5	11	34.4	67.7
		4 - As Expected	9	28.1	96.8
		3	1	3.1	100.0
		Total	31	96.9	100.0
	Missing	System	1	3.1	
	Total		32	100.0	
ASX 201-300	Valid	7 - High	2	9.1	9.1
		6	4	18.2	27.3
		5	6	27.3	54.5
		4 - As Expected	7	31.8	86.4
		3	2	9.1	95.5
		2	1	4.5	100.0
		Total	22	100.0	100.0
Other listed	Valid	6	1	50.0	50.0
		5	1	50.0	100.0
		Total	2	100.0	100.0
Other	Valid	6	1	100.0	100.0

Q7. Taking all aspects of their service into consideration, which of the following best describes your overall view of your external auditor?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Excellent	35	38.5	38.5	38.5
	Above average	49	53.8	53.8	92.3
	Average	6	6.6	6.6	98.9
	Below average	1	1.1	1.1	100.0
	Total	91	100.0	100.0	