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Weir, J., Webbstock, D. and Dixon, J. (2003) *Improving reviews – can the centre hold?* ATN Evaluations and Assessment Conference, 24 - 25 November, Adelaide.

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Improving reviews – can the centre hold?

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Abstract: *This paper undertakes an exploration of quality reviews, focusing on the tension between central organisation and ownership at the periphery. At Monash, area reviews form a major component of the evaluation moment in the quality management system of planning, acting, evaluating and improving at the organizational level and throughout all levels of the university. All areas, including support services, faculties and research centres are subject to review. Similarly, at the University of Natal in South Africa, cyclical reviews are required for all areas of university activity. The models of implementation, are, however, very different. The Centre for Higher Education Quality (CHEQ) is responsible for ~~leading and supporting~~ driving quality within Monash University, but ~~devolves the~~ responsibility for organising and conducting the reviews ~~resides with~~ the area concerned. On the other hand, the Quality Promotion Unit at the University of Natal has a comparatively greater role in running the reviews concerned. In both instances the Units are busy reflecting on their processes on the basis of their experiences and feedback from the areas concerned. In this paper we examine and compare the approaches so that the resulting lessons from these experiences will be of use to other universities undertaking reviews in support services and faculties. We focus particularly on the issue of how much involvement is optimal and what sort of support is needed for areas conducting reviews.*

Keywords: self-review, quality management system

Background to Reviews at Monash University, and the University of Natal

Monash University was established in the state of Victoria (Australia) in 1958 and enrolled the first students in 1961. Since then Monash has grown enormously and is now a large, multi campus, globally located university with 49,500 students from over 100 countries, and almost 5,000 staff. The University has 10 faculties offering approximately 700 undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. There are six campuses in Victoria, one in Malaysia, one in South Africa, as well as centres in England and Italy.

The University of Natal in South Africa is, in many ways, comparable to Monash, but in other ways very different, not least in a vastly different historical background. The University of Natal, located in the KwaZulu-Natal region, emerged from the Natal University College (NUC), which was established in 1910. It had 57 students registered in Pietermaritzburg and after World War 1 expanded to Durban. From 1919-1949 it was a constituent college of the University of South Africa. A Medical School for African, Indian and Coloured students was established in 1947 in Durban¹. The University continues to grow and is now a large research university in South Africa, with approximately 30 000 students, offering some 750

¹ When the South African Nationalist Party came to power in 1948, the entire education system was structured around apartheid ideology.

programmes, mostly in contact mode. Its present four campuses, however, are all located in the KwaZulu-Natal region, rather than spread internationally. It is set to merge with the University of Durban-Westville (established during the apartheid era to serve the Indian population) in January 2004 as part of the government's restructuring plans for higher education. The number of higher educational institutions in South Africa will be reduced from 36 to 21. The new combined institution will have some 40 000 students on five campuses. Far from an internationalisation agenda, the new institutional vision is "to be the premier university of African scholarship" (*Vision, Mission, Goals & Core Values for the New University*), concentrating on becoming a global player whilst serving the needs of the region.

Quality Assurance

The Australian government, as far back as the 1980s, encouraged higher education institutions to undertake discipline-based reviews. However, there was no process to ensure that recommendations from such reviews were implemented. In 1992, the approach to quality assurance was more formalized through the establishment of the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE), which undertook three rounds of audits from 1993-1995. The national audits placed considerably more emphasis on quality assurance. Despite the CQAHE abandoning the audit process after the three rounds, Monash's commitment to a process of continual improvement continued. From 1998, institutions have been required to submit an Institutional Quality Assurance and Improvement Plan to government outlining goals and aims in the four core areas of teaching and learning, research, management and community service. The Plans also include performance indicators and data for outcomes, and are integrated with annual funding negotiations. In March 2000, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was established by the Ministerial Council on Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) to "promote, audit, and report on quality assurance in Australian higher education" (<http://www.auqa.edu.au/aboutauqa/auqainfo/index.shtml>). All Australian universities are self-accrediting and remain so following the establishment of AUQA.

This background contrasts with South Africa where the advent of external quality assurance is relatively recent, and most universities have yet to undergo their first institutional quality audits conducted by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), a permanent sub-committee of the Council for Higher Education (CHE). The HEQC has a mandate to undertake programme accreditation and quality promotion activities as well as institutional auditing, and to some extent has decided to link these processes. The successful outcome of an audit visit would be, for instance, the granting of self-accreditation status to an institution for its programmes.

Monash University developed a planning document in 1999 that set the vision of a "self-reliant, broad-based, global university and learning organization, conducting innovative teaching and research of international quality and relevance, and engaged actively with the diverse regions, communities, industries and professions which it serves" (*Leading the Way: Monash 2020*, p. 5). Although Monash had internal

processes for self-review long before the establishment of AUQA, there was an uneven approach to reviews within faculties, and there was no unifying agenda for quality development. *Leading the Way* provided a long-term strategic direction and reference for a quality management system. [Under the title of “strengthening review processes”, *Leading the Way* The review process was formally identified and recognised that as “review processes form an important part a critical part](#) of the current Monash planning and review cycle, and will become more regular and consistent [in order to provide clearer information on performance trends ...”](#) (*Leading the Way: Monash 2020*, p. 18). It clearly signaled an intention of strengthening the review process. As part of enacting that vision, the Vice-chancellor established the Centre for Higher Education Quality (CHEQ) in September 2000. CHEQ’s mission to lead and support the development of quality assurance and improvement began by defining and clarifying Monash’s core values and approach to quality for both internal and external purposes. The approach outlined in *Leading the Way* was expanded through *Quality at Monash: Values and Principles*, produced in June 2001.

Monash has three themes—innovation, engagement and internationalisation—which “permeate and give direction to the activities of Monash at every level” (*Leading the Way: Monash 2020*, p.5), [and](#) ~~The~~ Seven Core Values and Principles that underpin Monash’s approach to quality including [“valuing diversity, devolution and comparable treatment”](#) and ‘valuing self reflection and external reference’. Thus, while policy has been developed centrally, individual areas conduct and manage their own quality and review processes. The involvement of individual staff and teams in quality improvement and review, and their ownership of the process for their areas, is seen as critical for success and long-term improvement.

The University of Natal’s quality assurance processes have also been developed over several years. The principles underlying the approach to quality promotion are not dissimilar to those at Monash. The Unit established to develop quality systems at the end of 1998 is deliberately named the Quality Promotion Unit, (QPU), rather than “quality assurance unit”, to signal that the Unit is a resource for quality assurance but that the responsibility for quality assurance lies with the Deans, Heads of Schools and Divisions, and indeed that all individual staff members are responsible for quality. One of the main principles, as at Monash, is that self-reflection, with external validation, should be the basis of quality assurance processes. Achieving quality with equity too, is an important principle, particularly in the post-apartheid South African context where redress for past inequities is high on the higher education agenda. The forthcoming merger is creating a complete reorganisation of academic life. Some faculties are changing location while all Schools are being restructured in line with merger requirements. Such far-reaching change and ongoing uncertainty as to the very basics – e.g. where academics will be teaching in future - is having a huge impact on the ability to implement stable and enduring quality systems. Given that reality, merger institutions will not face an HEQC audit before the 2007-2009 cycle.

The Role of the Centre in Quality Reviews

Monash University

The Monash Planning and Review cycle “recognises the cyclical nature of planning, implementation, performance assessment, review, revision and updating” (*Quality at Monash: Value and Principles*, p. 9). This is expressed in the form of the quality cycle, with plan–act–evaluate–improve as the key steps. The evaluate step is seen as consisting of monitoring and review, with monitoring of key activities being a more frequent, formative activity, and reviews being a more formal, summative activity, being conducted in all operational areas of Monash in a rolling 5 year cycle.

The definition of quality at Monash is fitness for purpose, so the primary intent of reviews is to evaluate the unit’s fitness for purpose. Reviews also offer the opportunity to consider fitness of purpose, and to reflect on the processes used to achieve that purpose, the outcomes achieved and the means by which outcomes are evaluated. Academic reviews include courses (programmes), research and research training, professional and community activities, internal organisation, management, quality assurance and improvement. A review unit may be a faculty, school, department, centre, or support area. Support services, including CHEQ itself, are also reviewed.

Consistent with the principle of diversity, devolution and comparable treatment, individual work units conduct their own review process, assisted and supported by CHEQ. Deans and directors forward their review schedule to CHEQ which is then entered into a database and publicised on the CHEQ website. This same database records the outcomes of each review and actions taken as a result. Published guidelines for academic, course and support services review were published and are the principle means by which – and the main extent to which - reviews are standardised across the university. Support materials have been developed (including a D-day minus interactive review planner) and published on the CHEQ website, a workshop program developed and individual support is provided by CHEQ. The whole review process at Monash is overseen by the Quality Development Committee, which consists of the Vice Chancellors’ Group and the Director of CHEQ.

Self-review is the first phase of the review process. It presents an opportunity for the unit to ‘consider its directions, progress, achievements and strengths, as well as areas for development and improvement and the means of achieving those’ (*Guidelines for Academic Review* p3). A team is appointed to lead the self-review and produce a self-review document. The development of the self-review document requires both the collection of information and reflection on the information that has been assembled. Thus, units are expected to be self-reflective before they obtain an external point of reference. In this way the learning achieved from

the process of self reflection and the ownership of its findings are intended to generate higher levels of commitment to the final outcomes.

An external panel is then assembled, consisting of senior counterparts external to Monash, members of relevant professional associations or industry bodies, senior Monash staff and a senior Monash student. This panel studies the self-review document and plans a review visit to verify the findings, probe for further information, and invite feedback from stakeholders. The external review report is prepared and presented to the head of the unit or dean, and lodged with CHEQ. Its recommendations are considered and an implementation plan developed to address the selected improvement opportunities identified. Six months after the report has been received, a progress report is prepared for Quality Development Committee, which may ask for further information in regard to progress with the implementation plan. While this paper attempts to concentrate on the task of coordinating and managing the review process by a central unit within the university, the issue of managing an external panel is another challenge in itself. The sensitivities involved in steering senior staff (who are mainly from organisations outside Monash and are providing their time and expertise free of charge) towards a valued outcome for Monash are considerable indeed.

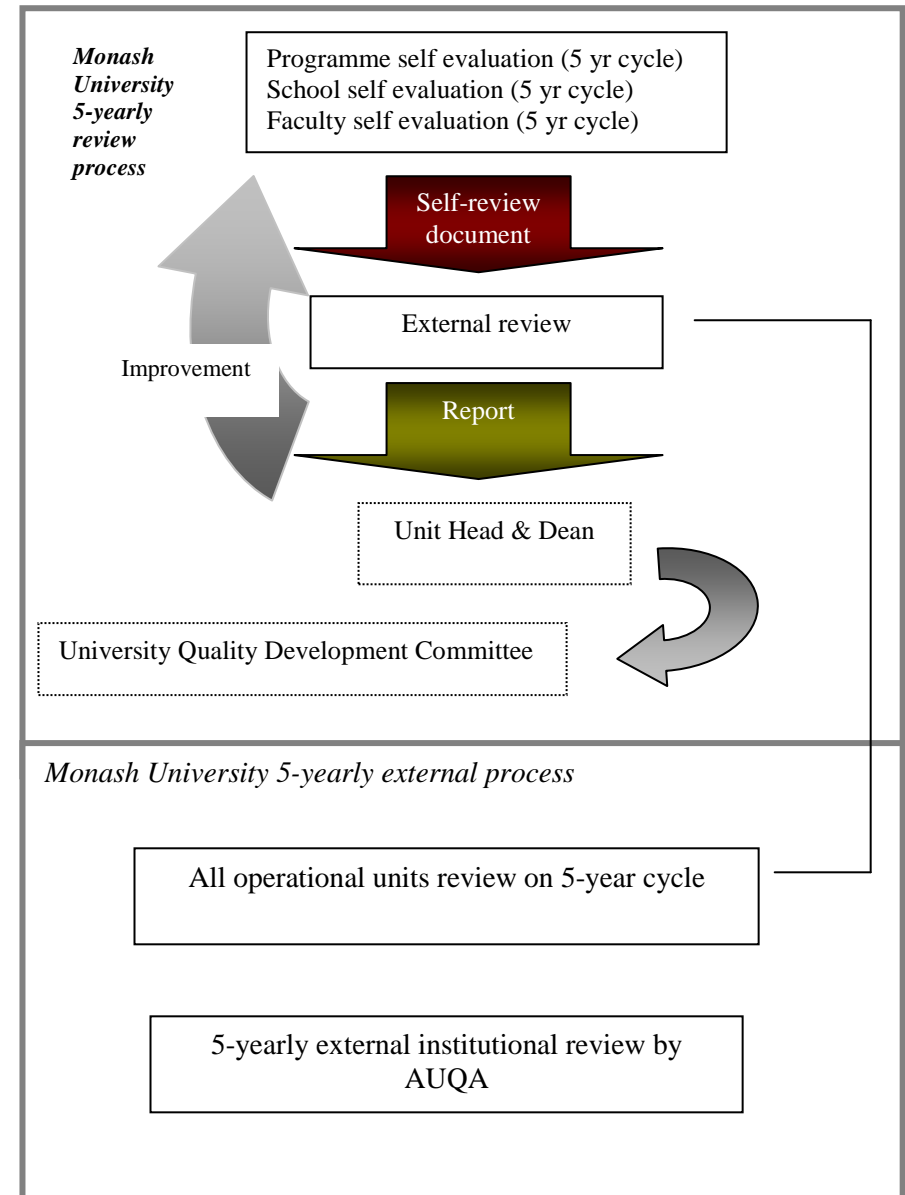
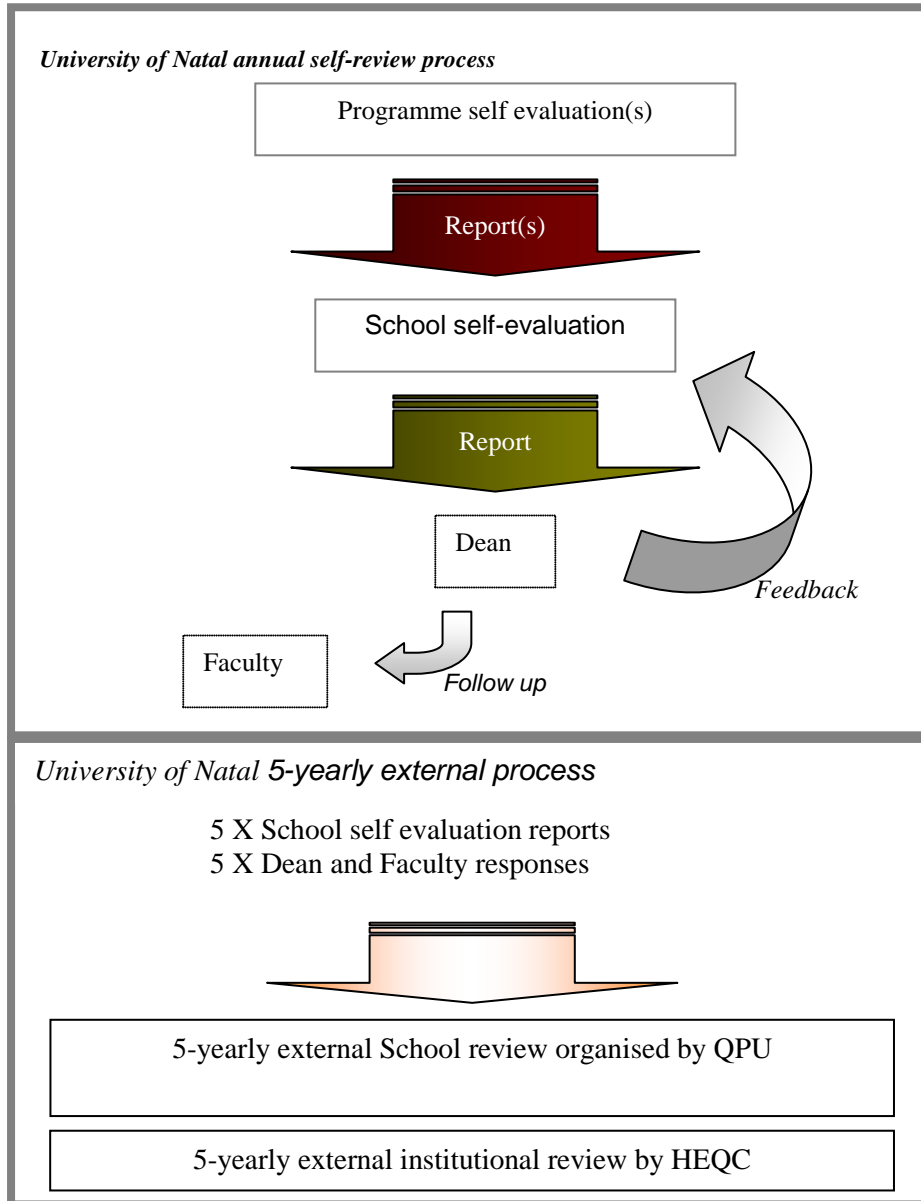
University of Natal

In recent years a number of quality assurance processes have been developed at the University of Natal and, as at Monash, they include a system of external reviews of both Schools (the academic units of analysis) and Divisions in the support sector. The system has been in operation for three years now. While for the support sector the processes are new, in the academic sector the external quality reviews are built on a tradition of departmental reviews (before the departments were restructured into bigger schools in a complete restructuring process undertaken in 1999). There has been a change in emphasis in the reviews, however, to concentrate on quality issues, as well as the introduction of a requirement to undergo a thorough self-evaluation first. Another change has been the practical organisation of the reviews by the University's Quality Promotion Unit. Part of the rationale for these changes lay in the reflections of the University on past processes. In the reflections undertaken in the University's Senate, it was evident that, as the departmental reviews had been Chaired by the Dean of the Faculty, and the panels had been set up by the departments concerned, they were sometimes not perceived to be reviewing the department entirely impartially. A second concern was the length of time it sometimes took for reports to be produced and for the recommendations to be acted upon. A further concern was simply that it was difficult for the Deans to find the time to set up the number of reviews necessary in their Faculties.

The new external review policy passed by Senate provides for a degree of centralisation of the process, in that the guidelines and the practical organisation, as well as the funding for reviews, are the responsibility of the Quality Promotion Unit. While the Unit does not actually evaluate the School, it does have a member on every review panel to both facilitate the process and ensure consistency of operation. It remains, however,

the academic School or support division's responsibility to initiate the process, and the line managers' responsibility to implement the recommendations. While the QPU sets up the review panel and organises the process, this is done in constant collaboration with the School or Unit concerned – the DVC Academic formally appoints the panel. It's a constant balancing act, trying to find panellists whose recommendations the School will accept, but who are sufficiently impartial for those recommendations to be as incisive as possible. The policy provides for a panel comprising three external discipline experts, a member of the Faculty (but not of the School), a student, a QPU representative and a Chair who is a senior academic at the university but who is from a different Faculty (*University of Natal Policy on School Reviews*). In all but one case so far, a member of the QPU has written the report, though it is the Panel Chair's prerogative to decide who should write the report. Before the external review is conducted, the School (or Division) is required to undergo a thorough self-evaluation, which the external panel will use as the basis of its validation exercise. After the review, the School has a chance to respond before the report goes to the Executive, the Dean and the Faculty Board. While the self-review and external review of departments are part of a single, 5 yearly process at Monash, there is a separation at UN in the sense that there are time-series ~~reviews-self-evaluations~~ of a ~~School~~-feeding into a single external review conducted every five years.

Comparison of processes



Central involvement and support for areas conducting reviews

Monash University

Monash's devolved approach promotes ownership of the process by those involved —especially from the self-review. It means that there is a growing core of people developing a comprehensive understanding of quality assurance and improvement processes rather than confining expertise to CHEQ. On the other hand however, progress in terms of implementation of the review schedule is uneven, and outcomes are highly variable, because CHEQ has little direct involvement in reviews. Some have been more successful than others. Clearly the most successful reviews are those that are well managed and are conducted in an economical fashion. The more drawn out the process, the less benefit is likely to be gained. Units that are prepared to be open and honest in the scrutiny they apply and permit others to have are more likely to attract recommendations that will significantly add value to their processes. Those that are inclusive in the feedback they seek – especially from their staff and other stakeholders — tend to produce an experience that those stakeholders see as valuable and outcomes that are valued, because they participated in their identification. The exchange of experiences and learning that occurs is not only contributing to the learning organisation concept, but also reducing barriers – particularly between academic and support service areas - as Monash staff participate in external panel reviews.

The ~~recently defined schedule for first~~ review ~~s-cycle~~ is in its second effective year of operation, and both CHEQ and the various parts of the university are gauging the impact of a strengthened review process on their operations. Clearly the workload is a challenge, not just for the review teams and CHEQ, but also for the external panels ~~s-who agree to assist~~. The need to ensure that ~~ate~~ benefits accruing from reviews outweigh the costs (both time and money), as well as achieving the right balance, is a challenge.

Despite devolvement, the sheer workload for CHEQ staff is also problematic. Support materials and staff development, for example, are critical. University endorsed guidelines for academic and support reviews, including standard terms of reference, have been developed to enable a systematic university-wide approach to reviews thus providing the foundation for an overall approach to quality development at Monash. CHEQ is endeavouring to attain efficiency through workshops and developing more materials. We expect the problems with demand to lessen over time as more people gain experience of the process. Many of those who have taken part so far have embraced the process and experienced the benefits of self-review. ~~Others however, still see review as a compliance process leading up to the AUQA audit and one that will not continue once the University has been audited.~~

University of Natal

At the University of Natal, the policy provides for a five-year cycle of external reviews, although most of the reviews undertaken so far have been at the request of a Dean where Schools have been experiencing major difficulties. As mentioned above, the University of Natal has been undergoing major restructuring in recent years, and a very fraught merger process. In this context, it has been difficult to establish a regular cycle of reviews – for instance, ahead of the merger, Schools have had little time to consider reviews where they are busy disestablishing current formations and amalgamating with other groupings in new ones. At a very basic level, with structures changing, many recommendations made in a review would be quickly made irrelevant – to whom do they pertain? A certain degree of continuity – both of Executives, committees and structures is a prerequisite to developing stable and enduring systems of quality assurance.

Given that the first rounds of reviews focused mainly on Schools with major difficulties, the self-evaluation aspect of the reviews was not always conducted in as inclusive and analytical a manner as possible, and it became apparent that Schools would need considerable guidance and training in conducting self-evaluations. The QPU has thus developed a “Toolbox” for School and programme self-evaluation purposes, comprising guidelines to a workshop-based process. The Toolbox supplies Schools with a resource on CD to use themselves and which they can adapt according to need and context. It includes a workshop facilitator’s guide, overhead transparencies, PowerPoint presentations and a suggested report format. This process has been piloted with one Faculty comprising three amalgamating schools with great success, and at present the Toolbox is being discussed individually with each Head of School. The response so far has been very positive, with Schools set to undertake annual self-evaluations based on these guidelines in the post-merger institution. This is intended not only to improve quality through reflection, but to better inform the external review process, which would then be based on five years’ thorough annual self-evaluations, rather than one conducted hurriedly just before the review date.

In terms of the management of the review process by the QPU, this has had both advantages and disadvantages. The central management has meant that reviews have been able to be set up more quickly, as this can be the dedicated function of a QPU staff member, and in most cases, the reports have been produced very soon after the review. It has shifted the burden of organisation of reviews from busy Faculty offices, and ensured that panels have been regarded as more impartial than in the past. It has, however, also placed a huge strain on the staffing of QPU, especially where reviews are running simultaneously – in one case this resulted in a delay in producing a report, which undermined the efficacy of the implementation of the recommendations. Being concerned that a sense of ownership of the review process would be lost through central organisation, the QPU has taken pains to make sure that Schools are fully consulted and involved in the review process. Despite the constant consultation, it does seem that the sense of ownership of the process at School level is not optimal. The hope is that this will be overcome through Schools carrying out their own self-evaluation processes. It’s a constant dilemma – left to themselves, as Schools were in the self-evaluation part of the first reviews, they are either done badly, or in a non-inclusive way, or, helped along with the process by the QPU, in a way that is indeed perceived to be ‘professional’, Schools’ sense of ownership

lessens. In the development of the self-evaluation component of review, the hope is that this can be overcome not only by the judicious use of support materials, but also through the training of members of staff in Schools on both quality matters and workshop facilitation. From the one pilot it was evident that, although the part of the process facilitated by the QPU was very well-received by the members of the participating Schools, follow-up activities arranged by the Faculty itself have been less well organised and therefore less effective. The temptation is for the centre to jump in and rescue the periphery, but the reality is that if the centre were to do that, the process would be impossible to take to scale. Perhaps the best answer lies in more support materials and, mostly, more training.

Conclusion

Both institutions identify a tension between ownership and efficacy, and have dealt with that in different ways. Both embrace the ideal of ownership of a self-review for reflection and improvement, but the external panel is one area where central involvement varies. Both processes are still evolving, and the question of what level central unit involvement is optimal is dependent on context and circumstances. The strategies of encouraging a degree of self-sufficiency by the provision of training and support materials are common to both. While Monash is slowly moving towards greater standardisation through these mechanisms, the University of Natal appears to be moving towards reducing centralised control through the very same process. It is always difficult to resolve the tension between devolution and control, and it is clear that, whatever method used, proper central coordination of the process is necessary to ensure valued outcomes. Both universities embarked on their review process from opposite starting points, with Monash using a highly decentralised approach and Natal exercising a degree of central control. From the experiences of both processes over time, there now appears to be a degree of convergence with a shared focus on enhancing the skills of the review team within a clear policy framework.