

Quality Reviews in Higher Education

Jennifer Weir and Jill Dixon

*Centre for Higher Education Quality, Monash University,
PO Box 3A, Clayton campus, Vic 3800, Australia*

This paper describes a central unit's approach for coordinating and managing the review process within a large multi-campus, research-intensive university. Key steps included establishing a vision or approach to quality, communicating the approach throughout the university, empowering operational areas, emphasising a process of continual improvement, and ensuring links with decision-making bodies such as Monash's Vice-Chancellor's Group – Quality. Critical success factors for reviews are outlined. These include: communication, organisational commitment, neutral approach, forward planning, broad input, regular reports, support materials, and a structured approach. The Monash experience may be of use to other universities developing support systems for reviews.

1. Introduction

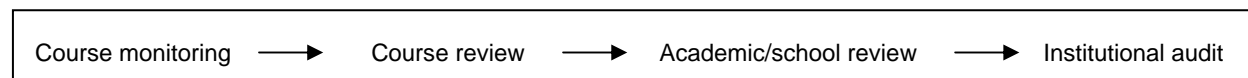
Monash University, while being a member of the Group of Eight universities, is different from its counterparts in a number of ways. It is large, with nearly 50 000 students and approximately 5000 staff members. It is diverse, with 10 faculties offering approximately 700 undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications across 8 campuses, including campuses in both Malaysia and South Africa. It is the most internationalised of all Australian universities, with students from over 100 countries studying at its campuses. These internal factors, together with the external factors facing all Australian universities, prompted the recognition of the need for a university-wide quality system and, in September 2002, the establishment of the Centre for Higher Education Quality (CHEQ) with the mission to lead and support the development of quality assurance and improvement. CHEQ's first achievement was to develop a conceptual approach to quality, and to communicate the approach or vision through a publication, *Quality at Monash: Values and Principles*. The approach incorporates the quality cycle (involving Plan, Act, Evaluate and Improve) as the quality management system for Monash.

The Monash quality cycle 'recognises the cyclical nature of planning, implementation, performance assessment, review, revision and updating' (Monash University, n.d., p. 9). This approach is consistent with the action learning and action research model commonly used in educational institutions, and with the ADRI (Approach, Deployment, Results and Improvement) assessment dimensions of the Australian Business Excellence Framework. While this paper concentrates on the 'evaluate' step of the quality cycle, it is emphasised that the full impact of evaluation activities is felt when the findings lead to improvement and to organisational learning. The evaluate step is seen as consisting of monitoring and review, with monitoring of key activities being a more frequent, formative activity. Reviews are a more formal, summative activity, being conducted in all operational areas of Monash (support services, faculties and research centres) in a rolling five-year cycle. Policy has been developed centrally, but individual areas conduct and manage their own quality and review processes. The empowerment 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. In this paper we outline lessons from two years of reviews.

Monash incorporates the three approaches to monitoring evaluation that John Owen outlines (1999, p. 240), that is, component analysis, devolved performance assessment, and systems analysis. CHEQ has the role of coordinating and monitoring outcomes of reviews (component analysis), although the agendas are set by the area heads and responsibility for all steps of the review (including financial support) is devolved (devolved performance assessment). In some senses the third approach of systems analysis also applies in that course reviews feed into overall faculty reviews—all of which comprise a major element of the quality assurance and improvement approach at Monash—and also feed into the overall national audit. This is represented in Figure 1 and perhaps forms what Owen calls hierarchy (1999, p. 248). In

practice it is less systematic than the hierarchy would suggest; however, it is expected that there will be alignment of mission for each level in the university. CHEQ established overall guidelines and a set of indicators. All three approaches are utilised in line with common goals (mission and value) and a common goal (quality assurance and improvement, and the external audit).

Figure 1 **Course reviews feeding into audit**



The definition of quality at Monash is ‘fitness for purpose’, so the primary intent of reviews is to evaluate the operational area’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, also conduct reviews using somewhat different terms of reference but identical principles. In this way, it is hoped that a ‘culture of evaluation’ will permeate all areas of the university.

The Monash approach to reviews aligns with the ‘monitoring evaluation’ form described by Owen (1999) that assesses program outcomes and is closely related to the allocation and use of resources. In the context of higher education and the national quality agenda, universities need to be seen to be making good use of funds and to provide a quality education; however, establishing the performance of universities is not as simple as pure profitability. As Owen outlines, monitoring evaluation form considers:

- the use of articulated program plans that provide specific directions for program delivery
- checking that the delivery and outcomes specified are ‘on track’
- developing management information systems that can provide responsive, valid and useful information for assessing program delivery and outcomes
- developing mechanisms by which programs can be fine-tuned on the basis of the findings provided (reproduced from Owen, 1999, p. 239).

The quality approach is also in accordance with a commitment to improvement or continuous improvement as a cycle of planning, acting, evaluating and improving. The cycle is characteristic of the action research approach and quality review evident in Owen’s ‘interactive form’. The evaluation forms don’t necessarily stand in isolation, and overlap between forms is evident in the Monash approach.

2. The Monash Process

Consistent with Monash principles of diversity, devolution and comparable treatment, individual work units conduct their own self-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 web site at http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/cheq/reviews/reviews_at_monash.html

This same database records the outcomes of each review and actions taken as a result. The review process at Monash is overseen by the Vice-Chancellor’s Group – Quality, which consists of the Vice-Chancellor’s Group and the Director of CHEQ. Self-review is the first phase of the review process at Monash. It presents an opportunity for the operational unit to ‘consider its directions, progress, achievements and strengths, as well as areas for development and improvement and the means of achieving those’ (Centre for Higher Education Quality, n.d., p. 3). 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 Monash stakeholder (e.g. a senior student or staff representative). 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 is developed to address the selected improvement opportunities identified. Six months after the report has been received, a progress report is prepared for the Vice-Chancellor's Group – Quality, which may ask for further information in regard to progress with the implementation plan.

3. Central Involvement and Support for Areas Conducting Reviews

In Monash's devolved approach, and more centralised approaches (Weir, Dixon & Webbstock; 2003), the availability of a suite of self-support tools and materials is significant for success. The Monash materials have been developed through collaboration with previous review leaders and are available on the CHEQ reviews web site. 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. The review database shows all notified past, present and planned reviews (1998–2008), information concerning the self-review and external panel membership, report date and availability, major recommendations and follow-up actions. The latter two fields are also used for reporting to the Vice-Chancellor's Group – Quality. There is a downloadable interactive 'review planner' to assist in planning the administrative aspects of a review. Flow charts, guidelines, check lists and tables to outline and explain the various steps involved in conducting a review, and how to address the terms of reference, have also been developed. These include guidelines and check lists for the external review panel and for addressing the external panel recommendations.

Monash's devolved approach 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 variable, because CHEQ has little direct involvement in the reviews. Some have been more successful than others. In the early stages of the review process, there was considerable variation in the approach taken by areas conducting a review, mainly due to lack of consultation with CHEQ. Clearly, the most successful reviews are those that are well-managed and conducted in an economical fashion. The more drawn out the process, the less benefit is likely to be gained. Operational 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 members participate in external panel reviews.

4. Success Factors

While the approaches to the review process have varied widely, some critical success factors are evident. The 'smoothest' and most successful reviews incorporate the CONFIRMS approach:

- C – Communication plan developed and implemented; ongoing formal and informal consultation by the review leader with CHEQ
- O – Organisational commitment
- N – Neutral approach and openness to outcomes of the process
- F – Forward planning for the external review process, usually involving the panel chair
- I – Input by staff as part of the review process
- R – Regular reports of review progress to the management team
- M – Materials used supplied by CHEQ and, where appropriate, customised
- S – Structured approach, with a review project plan, a dedicated review leader and/or team, and a clearly identified project sponsor.

The recently defined schedule for reviews is in its third 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. The workload is significant, not just for the review teams, but also for the external panels. The need to ensure that benefits accruing from reviews outweigh the costs (both time and money) is a challenge.

Whether devolved or centralised reviews, the demands on the central unit are enormous (as reported by Weir, Dixon & Webstock, 2003), and the sheer workload for CHEQ staff is 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.

A number of steps were taken by CHEQ in 2003 to provide further guidance and support to reviews. A review support group within CHEQ to drive the review process was established. This group of quality advisers meets fortnightly and outcomes are reported to the Director, CHEQ, and individual actions are recorded on the CHEQ review planner. The relevant quality adviser (academic, support services, research) is responsible for contacting the review leader for all upcoming reviews listed on the reviews database, to offer support and to outline the resources available. A CHEQ review planner has been developed to record these actions and to maintain key details of each review. Support also includes meeting with all quality coordinators to discuss past reviews and those planned for 2004, and feedback has been sought on support required from CHEQ to assist faculties with reviews. A series of four workshops is now offered each semester for review teams, addressing the requirements for all stages of the review. The process of reporting review outcomes has been reinforced by the provision of guidelines and templates for reporting main actions taken or planned to address external panel review recommendations, both to the Monash community through the CHEQ web site and to the Vice-Chancellor's Group – Quality.

5. Conclusion

The review cycle at Monash has entered its most intensive period yet, with large numbers of reviews (including two full faculty reviews) taking place concurrently and a critical mass of know-how and experience yet to be developed in review teams. The balance between standardisation and autonomy, and centralisation and devolution is still being wrought. All stakeholders (including CHEQ) acknowledge that the workload is considerable, and most areas have yet to realise the benefits of this effort. The provision of workshops is critical, not only as a means of achieving consistency and good practice and sharing experience (between support and academic areas), but also as a means of reducing workload. Past review

leaders are contributing to these workshops and in the development of further materials. A staff questionnaire, developed by CHEQ to obtain staff input to review, is now being modified and enthusiastically used in a number of areas, and will be significantly enhanced as a result.

Those areas that have completed their review have reported benefits well beyond the value inherent in the process and the improvements that have resulted from the self-review and the external review. For these areas, reviews have also resulted in the opportunity to conduct some basic 'housekeeping', to review their quality assurance and improvement mechanisms, and to incorporate missing elements into their organisational memory and 'the way we do things around here'. The acceptance of the need for quality—not simply for compliance purposes—has undoubtedly assisted in the realisation and recognition of these benefits.

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