

PASSPORT

Scholarly Quality

Australia's Monash University joins the quality league.

By Jill Dixon and Helen Edwards

Until recently, Australia was one of few countries in the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development without a national quality assurance system to monitor the quality of its higher-education activities. That changed in March 2000, when the government formed the Australian Universities Quality Agency. The purpose of AUQA is to conduct periodic audits of the quality assurance procedures at Australian universities and state accrediting agencies.

Australian universities, like those the world over, have experienced extensive change over the past decade. An explosion in student numbers, more diverse student demands, funding cuts, weighty impact of information technology, increased competition, and growing presence of the commercial world in many facets of higher education have created unprecedented pressures on universities.

Change, a fact of life in most areas of the public and private sectors, is a new

and highly challenging phenomenon for people working in universities. Academia has been slow to change, and a constant struggle rages to maintain quality programs and services. It's fair to say that not all people working in universities welcomed the news that they would be audited for quality.

Monash University, whose main campus is located in Melbourne, Australia, decided to take a proactive role in developing its approach to quality. Though relatively small in comparison to many American universities, Monash is the largest and most diverse university in Australia. It has a staff and student population that totals more than 60,000 people; 10 departments (several of them larger than that of other Australian universities); eight campuses (two overseas); and many joint-venture domestic and international partnerships. Monash is a member of the Australian Group of Eight universities, which represent the older, more established Australian universities. All focus strongly on research.

In late 2000, Monash established the Centre for Higher Education Quality, with a mission to "lead and support the development of quality assurance and improvement in all areas of Monash University's operations." Quality advisors were appointed by the new director of CHEQ to represent the key activities of academic programs, research, and support services—such as Staff and Student Services, Information Technology Services, and Financial Resources Management.

The creation of a quality advisor for support services is unusual in a sector in which quality is traditionally seen as the business of high-profile academic programs and research areas. The rationale behind creating that position was that the quality of academic programs and services increasingly relied on the quality of their internal support services.

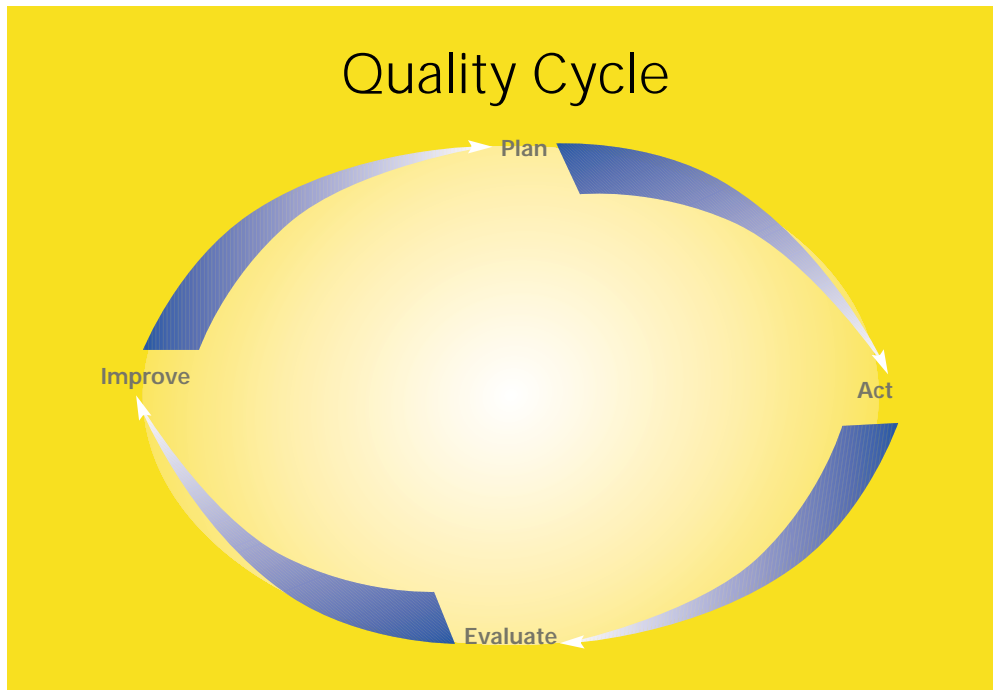
Most of the professional staff in CHEQ—five in all—have organizational staff development backgrounds. Their primary task: to help put quality systems in place and nurture a commitment to quality assurance and improvement. CHEQ developed a quality policy to serve as a sound theoretical basis for action. A set of quality values and principles was adopted as university policy, with the "quality cycle" as its centerpiece.

The quality cycle draws from the quality management movement (which provides structures and processes for continuous organizational improvement) and the action research and learning cycle (which similarly emphasizes the importance of having organizational processes to facilitate observation, reflection, and learning) to focus on planning, acting, evaluating (monitoring and reviewing), and improving.

The plan

Alignment of faculty and support services operational plans with the Monash vision and strategic plan, "Leading the Way, Monash 2020," and other institutional operational and functional plans is ongoing, with faculty and support services developing their own plans to articulate the way they'll assist Monash in achieving its overall strategic direction—enabled by the identification of performance indicators to measure progress towards key objectives. That's a major step for the academic community. It represents a shift towards a focus on its performance in achieving the central mission rather than the traditional emphasis on individual discipline.

Support services is taking the lead in planning for quality assurance and improvement through the development of service level agreements with their customers, the faculty. When fully implemented, faculty will be able to negotiate with their internal service providers the services and service levels



ensuring that plans are translated into action. CHEQ is introducing various stakeholder satisfaction measurement systems in addition to traditional evaluations of subjects, courses, and teaching styles. Support services is using the Balanced Scorecard as its performance measurement and reporting system, and CHEQ is using a “Learning and Growth” survey to obtain staff feedback on their learning and development opportunities.

A review program—in which support services and faculty review their plans, processes, and achievements every five years—is similar to the organizational self-

that they require, and will be charged accordingly. By 2003, Monash will be one of the first Australian universities—and one of a few in the world—to have fully negotiated SLAs between faculty and support services.

CHEQ, responsible for the development of SLAs, has worked hard to ensure that outcomes include reducing the cost of services and improving service quality. The SLA project has been a catalyst for the development of a customer service culture. Currently, the focus is on support services to provide and improve quality services, but faculty have begun to examine their own student and staff support services. For example, they’ve conducted focus groups with their academics, or students, to identify their needs with respect to such services as IT provision and enrollment. The desired model is a partnership approach, in which faculty and support services work together to deliver high-quality services to their staff and students.

In action

Monash, like most academic settings, has a long history of devolved decision making. Consequently, a key quality principle for Monash is that even though the quality policy is developed centrally, faculty and support services should implement quality-assurance and improvement frameworks and mechanisms to suit their particular contexts. CHEQ’s role is to advise those units on structures and methodologies, as well as provide an overall framework for achieving institutional goals. CHEQ is giving considerable attention to identifying monitoring systems to track performance against objectives.

Evaluation time

A primary task for CHEQ has been to help the university develop monitoring and review processes to evaluate objectives and progress.

CHEQ is further developing monitoring systems to help faculty and support services and the university as a whole by

assessment process of national quality frameworks such as the Malcolm Baldrige Awards. All Monash faculty and support services have prepared a schedule of reviews; an institutional self-review is in final stages. CHEQ sees the reviews as a primary mechanism for generating “big step” improvements; the institutional self-review has provided a voice for people to agree on the improvements needed to further benefit the whole university community.

CHEQ plays a major role in assisting the university and its units to take action on the improvement opportunities identified through the evaluation processes. It also drives the organization-wide improvements agreed upon from the institutional self-review. As tangible benefits begin to accrue from those efforts, the motivation to continue using the quality cycle will grow.

The quality cycle is increasingly used by groups within faculty and support services to systematically improve,

learn, and share. Slowly but surely, cross-unit learning is taking place as people who have experienced success help others do likewise.

CHEQ has been fully operational for a little over a year, so the tangible results are still to be documented. The response to all of the initiatives is encouraging. Very few staff focus solely on the prospect of the external audit; they're far more attentive to the internal initiatives that make a difference to their working lives. CHEQ, as a unit that represents all parts of the university, is working well. It's also being recognized and replicated as a useful model by other universities.

If by the time the audit occurs (within the next four years), Monash can demonstrate a commitment to

quality and an awareness of its strengths and improvement opportunities—and can point to systems in place to address key quality assurance and improvement needs—we believe we'll be well prepared. For now, we think we've made a good start.

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Take-Away Lessons

Monash's approach to change has been systems-driven, supported by learning opportunities and processes. CHEQ provides workshops on such issues as quality, customer service, and key performance indicators on request to support large-scale change, such as the SLA project. A formal faculty quality network has been initiated, which itself has spawned informal learning networks—something unusual in this traditionally silo structure. The CHEQ Website is a repository of performance support materials and tools, and a database of identified best practices; monash.edu.au.