Is Quality Improvement fit for purpose?:
comparing quality systems within a major Australian University

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Abstract

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How effective are quality reviews at identifying the real problems? What problems can they create? What value do they add? Do they necessitate management reviews to address specific problems? Are the two kinds of reviews complementary?

This paper provides a critical evaluation of the quality process developed by the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (FMNHS) at Monash University, Australia, and a critical comparison with course review as conducted in other major faculties (Science; Business and Economics), and with the unformalised single-step internal management review process.
Presentation

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Introduction
Quality assurance of higher education is an agenda announced in 1999 by the Commonwealth Government of Australia to improve the accountability of Higher Education institutions (Australian Universities' Quality Agency 2000-2009) to society, and to the students. Australia does not have universal accreditation of degree programs, although many professional degrees are accredited by professional bodies, with varying degrees of rigour.

Australian society and the higher education student body are significantly multicultural and included (in 2007), 455,000 international students (Hobsons Australia 2008), predominantly from South East Asia. The interests of society are synonymous with those of the government, as although public debate about education is somewhat limited, the suffrage is universal and compulsory for all citizens aged 18 and over.

The independent Australian Universities’ Quality Agency adopted a ‘fitness for purpose’ philosophy (Australian Universities' Quality Agency 2009), which permeates the Monash quality process (Monash University Centre for Higher Education Quality 2001; Monash University Centre for Higher Education Quality 2002; Monash University Centre for Higher Education Quality (no date)a as adopted and adapted by its faculties of Science, Business & Economics, and Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences (FMNHS). The recent Bradley Review of Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan et al. 2008) presages change, as it endorses the need for greater accountability and put[s] education back into the higher education debate, and return[s] students to the centre of the policy process. This emphasis has a pragmatic rationale, for student satisfaction is a marker of the sector's effectiveness in the export market (Slattery 2008).

A further recommendation of the report is the overhaul of the national quality regime, including the introduction of “an independent national accreditation body [which] will have an inquisitorial role in demanding institutions meet the standards expected of university degrees.” (Slattery 2008)

This last development brings to the fore the question of the efficacy of the existing quality improvement regime. Bradley observes (2008,p. xii) that nationally “there are now clear signs that the quality of the educational experience is declining” and predicts that without change, “in 2020 Australia will not be ...in the top group of OECD countries in terms of participation and performance – unless we act and act now.”

Aim
The rationale for Quality Assurance activities is far from established when the measurement of impact remains so elusive (Harvey 2006), and research in this area so comparatively rare (Harvey 2007). This paper presents observations about effects of a quality improvement based system, in an attempt to identify the value added, and determine whether the time, effort and money invested in the process offer a good return.

This process is contrasted with informal management review, another process available to organisational units, to further elucidate the strengths and weaknesses of the tools at hand.
These questions are important because Monash places a high priority on excellence in teaching and learning and of the overall “student experience”, quite apart from the clear implications for Australia’s global brand as an education exporter.

A cross section of reports was selected to represent the types of reviews undertaken at Monash. Three are drawn from the Quality Assurance process. The Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) review (Williams and et al 2007) covers the “principal degree” of the Faculty of Business and Economics and related programs. The Bachelor of Science (BSc) review (Luff 2006) addresses that flagship course. Also in 2006, the Faculty of MNHS reviewed faculty-run services and activities (Martin and McNicoll 2006), excluding the separately reviewed portfolios of teaching and research. These reports represent the experience of faculties which trialled the five-yearly review process for courses and faculties.

For comparison, we also assess the *ad hoc* management review of the Bioscience teaching at the Peninsula campus of Monash University (McNicoll and Davies 2008), about 25 kms to the south of the main campus at Clayton. [The Peninsula campus was formerly a teachers’ and nurses’ college.] This is a management review commissioned by the Dean of the Faculty of MNHS, on the curriculum and teaching arrangements for allied health programs. These reviews were all undertaken between 2006-2008, and are familiar to the authors, one or both of whom participated in each process.

**Background**

The Faculties of Science, Business and Economics and MNHS were the first faculties at Monash University to trial the QA process introduced in 2001. Science and MNHS were selected for this trial as a small and a large faculty; one predominantly offering a generalist education, the other predominantly professional programs. The Faculty of Business and Economics later joined the trial, thus ensuring that both of the university’s largest faculties were involved in testing the new processes for program review, and unit evaluation.

The trial was focussed on teaching activities, but Monash University is in fact a large research and teaching institution, earning approximately AUD232.6m (€136.25m) in 2007 (Monash University Planning and Statistics 2008), of which FMNHS is the major winner. At a conservative estimate, Monash has 55,000 students, and 14,000 staff (Monash University Planning and Statistics 2007).

**What sort of Quality?**

The aim of the Monash University Quality policy is outlined by the Quality Principles (Monash University Centre for Higher Education Quality 2001) as follows:

- creating the agenda in terms of fitness for purpose;

- recognition that quality is the professional responsibility of each individual and work group;

- the best way to effect quality assurance and accountability is through continuous quality improvement based on collaboration and the development of a learning organisation;

- a commitment to develop policy so as to assure comparable treatment in all areas of the university, while leaving room for different areas to develop implementation for their particular contexts;
• the value of an open, thoughtful and complementary approach to quality informed by international research and scholarship;

• a planned and systematic approach to quality including ensuring that the results of monitoring and evaluation are fed back in order to effect improvement;

• recognition that external points of reference provide valuable perspectives for further reflection and action.

This approach reflects the philosophy espoused by the national Quality Assurance regime, the Australian Universities’ Quality Agency (AUQA), which state:

AUQA uses as its primary starting point for audit each organisation’s own objectives and does not impose an externally prescribed set of standards upon auditees [our emphasis]. AUQA considers the extent to which institutions are meeting these objectives, and how institutions monitor and improve their performance. AUQA also takes into account the requirements of relevant external reference points established to guide institutions in setting their objectives. This approach recognises the auditee’s autonomy in setting its objectives and in implementing processes to achieve them within some overarching parameters, such as criteria set by agreed national or sectoral guidelines (Australian Universities' Quality Agency 2009).

For whose benefit do we “do quality”? 

In short, quality assurance is undertaken to achieve improvement for the good of the students, or the student experience. This orientation permeates the university’s policies in the form of a “no disadvantage” requirement.

The completion of reviews of programs and faculties demonstrates that many academics engage with the quality assurance process. The authors have encouraged academic self-review members to use the process to drive their own agenda, which has been well-received. It can also be observed that different disciplines and faculties place different emphasis on the principles for quality assurance.

The authors would like to distinguish this position from that of the university leadership, which is more closely aligned with the broad interests of the institution. The motivation of the institution to engage with Quality assurance embraces both good practice and the pragmatic self-interest of protecting and enhancing the university’s reputation and its place in the international education market.

The federal government pursues quality assurance in the higher education sector in the interests of accountability for public money. The interests of society are synonymous with those of the government, for reasons previously indicated.

There does not appear to be a significant degree of tension between these agenda within a quality improvement oriented system. It could be argued that no one actually loses from improvement, although they might gain less than they would like per iteration. Quality improvement seems to fit most of these purposes. Although it may please government, a system more driven by standards is less certain to appeal to other stakeholders and may threaten valuable features of higher education institutions.
Results and Discussion:

Process
All Monash quality reviews are a two-step, broad-sweep, improvement-oriented process of self-review followed by external validation by a panel, including interviewing stakeholders, site visits, and document review.

FMNHS process adaptations
The FMNHS has taken advantage of the opportunity to refine the process to suit its needs. The Faculty of MNHS adapted the quality process to strike a balance between providing the best experience to students, serving the Faculty’s needs and aligning with university direction (Luff and McNicoll 2004). Variations from the generic Monash University process will be discussed, as relevant.

The Terms of Reference (ToRs) for program self-review in the period 2006-8 covered “Course Structure, Course management (including planning, QA and development, Units and Major and Minor Sequences; Student Profiles; Teaching, Learning and Assessment; Human, Physical and IT Resources, and Health and Safety issues; Professional and Community Engagement.

Notably, none of the reviews selected have taken up the opportunity offered by the Course Review Process to fulfil QA requirements by “extend[ing] the external accreditation to include all the above terms of reference” (Monash University Centre for Higher Education Quality 2002), a practice which risks compromising the open, improvement-oriented philosophy which has permeated the Australian QA regime as elaborated by the AUQA in this period (Luff and McNicoll 2004).

[It should be noted that these Terms of Reference are historic, and the emphasis of revised terms of reference for course review “are drawn from the criteria for course approval, including the strategic case, the academic case and the business case for the course” (Monash University Centre for Higher Education Quality 2009)].

The Terms of Reference for quality self-reviews may be taken to be the terms of reference of the validating external review, or at the least, to have a strong shaping effect upon the final report. The exception to this rule is the FMNHS process, which provides explicit Terms of Reference to the external panel.

Adapting the Monash quality process
The FMNHS ToRs for self-review differ in that they are elaborated from the bulleted list provided by the university to address the “adequacy” of, or the “appropriateness” of arrangements in each category. This change was made to provide additional direction for program convenors, who in the early stages of the Quality process roll-out, found the university’s term of reference insufficiently explicit. It should be noted that in the FMNHS the convenorship of many programs is the responsibility of senior lecturers, and in many cases, this is the first management role these academics have undertaken.

The FMNHS Quality Office developed specific terms of reference for external panels, which were used in the FMNHS faculty review. These Terms spell out the responsibility of the panel
to be constructive in critically appraising the organisational unit, and also inform the panel of the Faculty’s commitment to safety in quality review processes and its rejection of punitive responses to findings.

The role of the external panel in the FMNHS review process is to scrutinise the self-review report, assess its adequacy and seek to validate its findings; to provide external perspective and add value were the opportunity arises, and to report promptly (Faculty of Medicine Nursing and Health Sciences 2003-6). This approach was, in fact, adopted by the BSc review, in an example of sharing resources developed during the trial process.

The purpose of the ToRs, which were reiterated by MNHS in a pre-review briefing for external panels, was in part to acculturate the predominantly external membership to the philosophy of the QA regime, but was also influenced by the nature of some accreditation processes to which FMNHS courses (esp. the medical degree) are subject, as well as reflecting a reaction to the manner in which some management reviews had formerly been conducted in the University.

In-house quality activities had all but stopped at Monash by 2001, when the AUQA process was launched. It was notable that when outlining the quality review process to our colleagues, the authors encountered significant levels of fear and hostility, suggesting people had had negative experiences of “review” in the past.

We have found the light touch guidance of formal external ToRs to be very effective, although nothing can absolutely guarantee that a panel does not become overly focussed on a single matter, or adopt an extreme position.

Management review process

By contrast, the management review process is a conventional, but unformalised single-step review by a largely internal panel with a brief to address specific problems. In the FMNHS such ad hoc reviews are not uncommon. This paper refers to the FMNHS process for management review as illustrated by the Biosciences review report. Access to equivalent reports from other organisational units is strictly limited due to their sensitive nature.

The quality self-review process at course, school, faculty, and university level produces detailed reports, and external panels respond with recommendations, formal affirmations and also commendations. Management review reports tend to be more tightly focused on recommendations. The flexibility of the Monash University QA process gives rise to some interesting variety among the reviews selected.

Purpose & Scope

The Terms of Reference for Quality review of Courses (and Faculties) address issues from regulations, to curriculum management, to clinical experiences, and professional activities. External course review necessarily takes a helicopter view. Thus investigation of curriculum content is limited to the alignment between course objectives and content, and the structures for course management.

The review of FMNHS as a faculty combined principles for academic review (Monash University Centre for Higher Education Quality (no date)a) with those for support services review (Monash University Centre for Higher Education Quality (no date)b), to address those matters for which the faculty organisation was broadly responsible (Martin and McNicoll 2006). It drew on a series of reviews of coursework and research activities.
By contrast, the Bioscience Teaching review is predominantly devoted to in depth exploration of administrative or management issues, despite brief but unrestrictive terms of reference to address the problem. The purpose of review is clearly set out in the report as the investigation of “current structures for managing Bioscience teaching” (Mc Nicoll and Davies 2008) and of quality concerns arising from Bioscience unit evaluation, at the Peninsula campus.

In the case of the Bioscience review it was important to make the Purpose very explicit, and to identify the agenda as arising from the Dean of Faculty. This approach was designed to allay fears about the intentions of the mother campus, which is internationally renowned in the biomedical sciences, towards the continuation of programs and teaching staff at the former nursing college at Peninsula.

The QA reviews have a different focus, and each takes a subtly different approach. The BSc program review report expresses its philosophical position:

> While the primary role of the Panel Review is to test and validate (or otherwise) the findings of the Self Review the panellists were equally mindful of the principles for course review ... The panel took the approach that “the objective of the review is to assess and test the quality and adequacy of the course in meeting its objectives, and follows the guiding principles outlined in the Course Review Policy”.

The BCom review does not identify a purpose, while the review of the FMNHS identifies a two-fold purpose... reflection within the organisation, with the aim of identifying strengths, weaknesses threats and opportunities for improvement, and ...[seeking] the perspective of outside experts upon the activities of the [Faculty] (Williams and et al 2007, p.12).

The scope of review is defined by the Terms of Reference, and by the expectation to provide recommendations, and commendations and/or affirmations. This model mirrors the AUQA audit reports on Australia’s 39 self-accrediting higher education institutions. Self-accreditation is the privilege of universities and their equivalents (e.g., the Australian Maritime College, the Melbourne College of Divinity) (Australian Universities' Quality Agency 2009); technical and vocational education is tightly controlled by the Australian Qualifications Framework.

The management review, predictably, was requested only to make recommendations. All three QA reports feature also commendations of good practice, while the BCom report has adopted the affirmation approach of the AUQA process, which offers external panels the opportunity to clearly endorse the recommendations of the self-review report.

These differences of emphasis highlight the diversity of interpretation within the QA process, as much as the distinctive nature of management reviews.

**What value do quality reviews add?**

**Discipline differences**

Quality improvement accommodates the uniqueness of the evaluand. The influence of the disciplines of the panellists is evident in several ways in the reports. The BSc review report is dominated by the inclusion of not only the Terms of Reference for the external panel, but also those for the self-review, brought together in a meticulously cross-referenced table. The panel
set out to endorse and build upon what they deemed to be an excellent self-review report. The BCom refers repeatedly to the views of industry representatives, the marketing of courses, and the points of difference of the course. These expectations and assumptions are also influenced by professional accreditation processes, which apply to some majors of the BCom.

The entry of a discipline “flavour” has a number of advantages. Reports are written in a language that the evaluand finds accessible and familiar, which promotes acceptance and facilitates implementation. A sense of “being on the same side” is fostered between the self-review team (be they the program management or the faculty management) and the panel. Panel composition, which is discussed below, is a further example of the influence that the experience and frame of reference of the review panel has upon the review report.

It is interesting to observe the tendency of some reviews to question and reprioritise ToRs and to develop a novel thematic conceptualisation of the matters considered to be significant. This is in marked contrast with reviews that do not identify a purpose or include ToRs in the final report.

**Common or complementary recommendations**

The four reviews selected have many common themes among their findings. All QA reports recommend improvements to course governance of one kind or another and the management review makes a similar recommendation regarding changing the departmental affiliation of the Bioscience teaching staff. Similarly, most reviews recommend changes to major or minor sequences.

That different panels, differently composed and using subtly different processes make the same finding, suggests a degree of confidence can be had in the process, however, as all reviews address teaching in some form, there is a potential problem which will be discussed later, regarding overlapping or contradictory recommendations.

The university’s processes are sufficiently sensitive to the context of different courses when a review of a generalist degree (BSc) can find that students would like better career guidance and require but do not value stronger work skills, whereas some allied health cohorts can be revealed to desire the work skills, but struggle to connect theoretical content to their professional practice needs. Such complementary ‘yin and yang’ findings underline the necessity of a QA approach which is shaped by the evaluands, and not vice versa.

**Panels**

The composition of panels illustrates the latitude within the system. It is the purpose of external panels to provide an outside point of reference to the evaluand, as panellists from outside the evaluand have the opportunity to see further, and those from outside the university are less likely to be invested in the status quo as self-review teams inevitably are.

The FMNHS excluded program convenors from course review panels after an early experience highlighted the conflict of interest, although their inclusion was sanctioned by the university process. This experience has led FMNHS panels to be predominantly composed of people external to the FMNHS, including representatives of the hospital sector, and peers from other comparable medical faculties.

The BSc review, by contrast, included several members from the Faculty of Science and within the university more broadly. This position is more appropriate for a generalist degree, the stakeholders of which include the other faculties, and the HE sector itself as a more
significant employer of graduates.

Certainly, the BCom panel was dominated by representatives of industry, although the effect of this was to produce a panel which featured a relatively small number of academics. Again this may be appropriate, but the authors have some reservations about the impact upon the report of this review.

The report does not seem to address areas where no recommendation, commendation or affirmation was made. This is in stark contrast to the other review reports, including, significantly, the management review of Bioscience teaching, which, as a tightly focussed review, might have been expected to produce a more tightly focussed document.

Despite these differences, quite different panels can reach similar conclusions and external panels with a high proportion of internal members can make bold and wide-ranging recommendations, as in the case of the BSc.

**How effective are these reviews at identifying the real problems?**

We posed the question - Do the skeletons tumble out of the closet in Quality review? Reviews of the BSc and BCom both revealed the absence of (effective) course management structures and inadequate accountability for curriculum management and quality improvement. Understaffing and inappropriate management structures were revealed in the BSc, FMNHS and BCom reports, and also in the Bioscience teaching review. Similarly, the review of the BCom family revealed poor rationale for the content of the compulsory core subjects, which suggests deeper systemic issues. Program marketing was identified as confusing in both courses.

When issues like draconian marking standards are revealed to disadvantage graduates against their peers in comparable universities, it can safely be asserted that the QA process is unearthing show-stopping problems. This said, it is less clear whether recommendations arising are adequately addressed (See Compliance, below).

In general professionalism can be relied upon in the academic review. Problems do come to the fore; findings of external quality assurance panels do overcome groupthink, where it exists, and staff of all stripes are usually found to be excellent (although this may be a conventional statement).

This is fortunate, because QI can be ineffective at dealing with other kinds of problems.

**What problems does quality review create?**

Recommendations can highlight a problem that is beyond the purview of the evaluand to address, for instance, that the FMNHS resist or reject the national education policy on the funding of research. The BCom review recommends that attention be given to the effectiveness of the university search engine, but this is not within the control of the BCom management, or even of the faculty of BUSECO.

Political recommendations to pressure the university make sense if the issue affects the strategic direction of the institution, and the evaluand is large and powerful like FMNHS or BUSECO, but in general, this is not the case. Such recommendations highlight the complexity of responsibility and accountability, in an environment of academic freedom and collegiality.

**Compliance:**
It is noted that even some that are in the power of the evaluand to address recommendations, including assessing student achievement differently, can take a long time to be accepted. In the experience of the Faculty of MNHS, in some circumstances an entire review report can be (almost totally) rejected. A change of leadership caused the FMHNS review to be shelved. A reactive approach to University monitoring of course reviews has allowed some flagship programs to evade quality review, especially those with heavy professional accreditation requirements. Stricter enforcement by a central unit of closing the evaluative loop is required to ensure that all scheduled organisational units undertake self-review and proceed to external panel review.

In an example of dysfunction that can stem from unprofessional management, the Bioscience teaching review revealed problems interprofessional education that were completely overlooked by the FMNHS review. Commendation of the faculty’s forward-thinking efforts in interprofessional allied health education was directly contradicted by the subsequent Bioscience review finding a need to re-establish specific units to address the knowledge base required by the large Nursing cohort.

This problem originated in the evasion by the management of the Nursing courses of submitting their self-reviews to an external panel.

**Multiple reviews:**
Conversely, there can be too many reviews. The extensive FMNHS faculty quality review followed portfolio reviews of education and research. These supposedly complementary reports opened the opportunity for conflicting recommendations.

The revelation of several courses without course management committees identifies the issue of repeated recommendations across multiple reviews. The Bioscience review reiterates the recommendations of the review of the B Emergency Health program that student administration at the Peninsula campus be aggregated into a one-stop shop serving all the allied health programs. Similarly, all reviews considered recommend alleviation of workloads. This repetition can be taken to validate some previous findings, but also underlines a systemic problem with, not only workloads, but the university-wide monitoring of quality review findings!

**Lessons and implications**
Without a flexible quality system there is a risk of losing comparable treatment, the scope for creative improvement, and (further) damaging collegiality. There is already some difficulty in engaging courses with onerous professional accreditation with the demands of internal quality review. Increased rather than reduced non-compliance is a risk associated with academic resistance to a philosophical change from Improvement to Standards.

Although it is not charged with this responsibility, quality improvement activities in our experience make a limited contribution to resolving the contradictions of applying managerial methods in the academic environment. While it may not make things any worse, the rigour in QA can be lost in these circumstances.

*Ad hoc* management reviews can be generated at a Dean’s discretion, to delve into serious problems revealed by quality processes. As demonstrated by the Nursing example above, the existence of two review processes has sometimes proven necessary to overcome the abuse of trust to which universities can be vulnerable.
The need for two processes suggests inefficiency as well as ineffectiveness and begs the questions, a) have we created an industry? and b) What is the cost/benefit of conducting quality reviews in this manner?

In one sense, quality activities are obviously an industry. This is only a problem if the process drives down the performance of Higher Education. The impact of quality activities is difficult to identify, although leaders from INQAHE report many positive signs (Harvey 2006). It seems that the debate regarding standards versus improvement may be ill-posed. Quality reviews are quite effective at identifying real problems, but they have limitations. They do not solve the long-standing problems of accountability that form the obverse to academic freedom, but we are unaware that any other process has resolved this dilemma.

Conclusions

Care should be taken to ensure that the value added by QI is not lost in the urgency to account for inputs by measuring outputs. Given the complex nature of universities and of academic endeavour, a sophisticated approach to quality seems indicated.

A rationalisation of demands imposed by the existence of two complementary types of review may be the answer. Given the imperative to improving the student experience, and protecting our exports, the effort seems warranted.

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