

When an Australian university adopted an integrated data management approach, it enabled system-wide improvement efforts to meet the needs of multiple stakeholder groups.

An Integrated Approach to Quality Enhancement in a Multi-Campus University

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Abstract

This article focuses on a multi-campus, research intensive Australian tertiary institution and examines one aspect of how the institution approaches quality management. In particular, it explores the recently introduced integrated evaluation data management system that consolidates and stores data from multiple internal and external sources to enable improvement and benchmarking. It also highlights some of the systems in place to communicate improvement to students and external agencies.

Introduction

Quality management in higher education has gained attention particularly during the last two decades. Among higher education institutions worldwide,

there have been various responses to this trend, ranging from implementing direct quality measurement instruments to self-audit and review processes. Increasingly, the rationale for quality management has been driven by funding mechanisms; accreditation requirements; the desire to keep pace with international practice; national audits; and other trends, such as massive growth in higher education, internationalization, and influences of information technology.^{1,2,3}

Quality has become topical in Australian higher education since the inception of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in 2000.^{4,5} AUQA's primary aims are promoting, auditing, and reporting on quality assurance in higher education. With the



Table 1: Institutional Surveys at the University

Instrument	What is it?	Person/group that initiates the survey	Person/group that respond to survey questions	Frequency
Monash Questionnaire Series on Teaching (MonQueST)	Eleven different questionnaires focused on a different type of teaching.	Voluntary involvement—teacher initiated.	Students enrolled in the class.	Each time a lecturer teaches a unit
Unit (Subject) Evaluation	Evaluation of units (subjects) to obtain student views on unit quality. Consists of eight quantitative and two qualitative university-wide items, with an additional 10 faculty-specific items.	Initiated by the faculty in collaboration with CHEQ.	Students enrolled in the unit.	Each time a unit is taught
Employer Survey	Employer feedback on the extent to which graduates demonstrate desired attributes.	Initiated by the Quality Development Committee.	Employers of recent Monash graduates.	Once every five years
Monash Experience Questionnaire (MEQ)	Survey to assess the overall student experience.	Initiated by the vice-chancellor's group (quality).	Students currently enrolled in the various programs	Once every two years
Monash Support Experience Questionnaire (MSEQ)	Survey assesses the overall student experience with administration and support services			

increasing push to accountability, universities are now required to demonstrate clear procedures and processes to ensure quality for their primary stakeholder—namely students—beyond the learning and teaching environment.

In line with external developments and accountability pressures, higher education has recently placed greater emphasis on meeting the expectations and needs of a widening range of stakeholders.^{6,7} One way in which universities have approached determining students' needs was by collecting student perceptions via surveys. Such data has a number of purposes, such as collecting diagnostic feedback for lecturers, gathering data for curriculum improvements, providing information to current and potential students, and measuring quality in teaching and learning. The first two purposes are recognized universally as the basis for many evaluations, and the other two purposes are relatively new to many universities.⁸

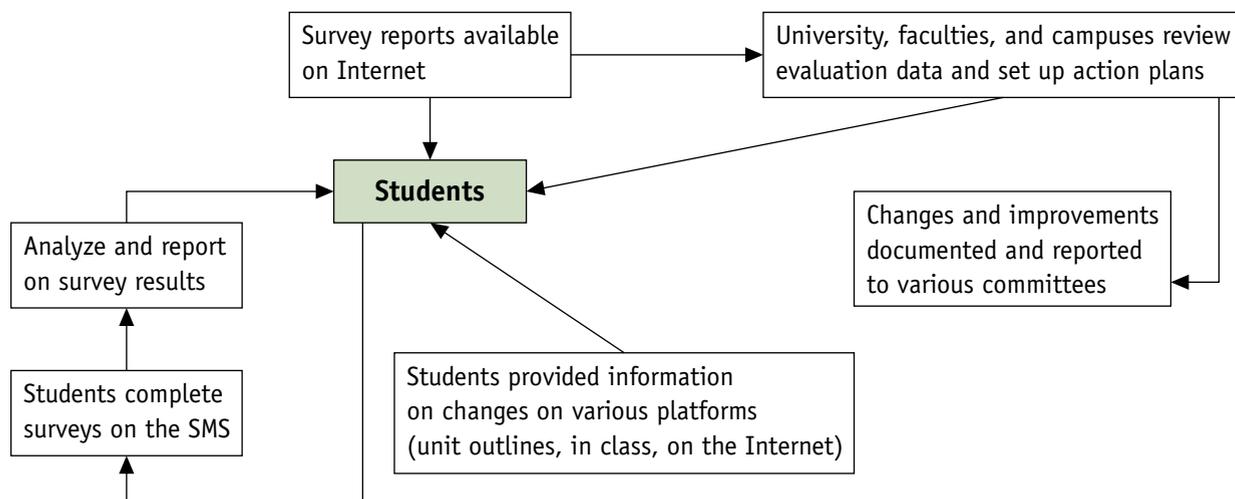
With increased focus on student needs and expectations, evaluation data has become a crucial part of institutional research and planning for strategic decision making in a growing number of universities, including in Australia. Familiarity with student satisfaction levels is critical for sound university management, as dissatisfied students can have a powerful impact on reputation, income, and the realization of institutional missions.^{9,10}

The requirement for collecting data to inform a range of stakeholders often leads to a variety of data sources and inconsistency in implementation. This also may lead to having too much data without a clear strategy for utilizing it effectively. This inherent tension between the collection and use of data is the center of debate in quality circles, and, in particular, the enhancement activities based on feedback.^{11,12,13}

This article addresses the following topics:

- *The process of integrating student evaluation data to measure improvement throughout the institution.* It explores how an integrated evaluation system

Figure 1: Outline of Effective Utilization of Institutional Evaluations and Surveys



has provided the opportunity for all campuses and faculties to respond to survey results, and also enabled benchmarking of respective campuses and faculties against each other to improve the student experience.

- *Some of the systems put in place to communicate improvement to students and external agencies.* This article highlights how one university brought together the systematic approach to student evaluations, dealing with issues of extensive data collection and utilizing the information to enhance teaching and learning.

Approach to Quality at Monash University

Monash University is a large, research-intensive, international institution with six Australian and two international campuses (Malaysia and South Africa) and partnered programs overseas. The university has 57,000 students from more than 130 countries. Programs offered at offshore locations are subject to regulations and quality assurance processes within the Australian higher education context, and also to the country-specific requirements of overseas higher education systems.

With quality emphasized not only in Australia, but also in other regions where the university operates, the institution realized the need and usefulness of evaluation measures related to the quality of units (subjects), courses (programs), and student experience in general.^{14,15} As a result, a set of core evaluations and surveys was developed. A central quality unit, the Centre for Higher Education Quality (CHEQ), would manage this process, as shown in Table 1. These tools are

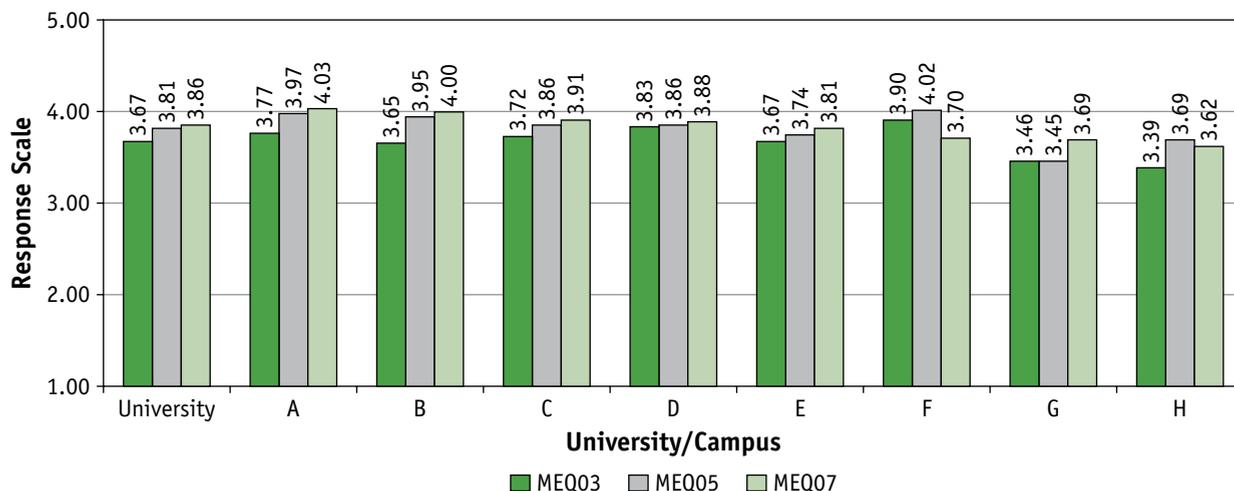
essential for applying the institutionally-adopted quality cycle—plan, act, evaluate, and improve—in the areas of teaching, research, support services, and at the institutional level.

Monash’s self-review exercise found that although information was available from a variety of sources, there was little systematic monitoring and opportunity for integrating and comparing this data. As a consequence, a phased approach to improving the use of data and its monitoring across the university was developed. Subsequently, the necessity to understand and cater to the needs of a wide range of stakeholders, and thus the requirement for a robust evaluation system was highlighted in a number of strategic documents. A team of senior managers headed by the pro-vice chancellor (quality) began bringing data together in a systematic manner with an integrated system of centralized data gathering and storing. The result was a survey management system (SMS) that integrates data collected online and from paper-based surveys and stores it in a centrally-located database.

Systematic Integration and Utilization of Data

Prior to 2005, there was no effective way of integrating data collected through evaluation surveys to monitor improvement in quality and identify possible trends within the major improvement areas. Various areas within the institution would obtain the required information from different data sources. This resulted in a lack of consistency, and neither comparative nor time-series data were available within areas or across the faculties and campuses.

Figure 2: Trend of Means for the Overall Satisfaction Item Across all Campuses, 2003-07



With introduction of the SMS system, data from the standard core surveys and the student management system is stored centrally. The integrated database facilitates the production of consolidated reports for unit and course leaders, heads of departments, deans, and management. It also more effectively assists them in making evidence-based judgments by enabling course and unit profiling as well as benchmarking. The purpose of such a profile is to identify areas that may require further investigation and improvement and areas of best practice. Figure 1 provides a schematic of Monash’s approach to utilizing evaluations and surveys effectively.

Benchmarking

Data obtained from surveys and evaluations consolidated in a single system provide the opportunity to respond to the results and benchmark student experiences. Although benchmarking was initially internal, it was later expanded to include at least three other institutions. For example, the university exchanged student experience data from the Monash Experience Questionnaire (MEQ) with other institutions to learn more about good practices in teaching and learning. Figure 2 illustrates how the SMS facilitates integration of evaluation data. This figure indicates the gradual improvement in students’ satisfaction over a four-year period. These results were used not only for monitoring change but also for internal and external benchmarking.

Discussion

Due to growing pressures on accountability, some universities have focused recently on a more systematic approach for responding to and

acting on student and other stakeholder feedback. Monash gradually developed an integrated data collection, analysis, and storage system, which enabled greater transparency and clarity of evaluation results. This system also provided more effective benchmarking within the institution and with other tertiary institutions

There are a number of benefits to employing a systematic approach to data collection and integration. For example, student survey data is tied to performance funding requirements.¹⁷ In Australia, the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) utilizes data from student feedback as one component in funding institutions. In 2006-08 LTPF allocated approximately AUS\$250 million to tertiary institutions over a three-year period. Monash obtained AUS\$19 million as a result of improvements demonstrated through actions taken based on stakeholder feedback. A key factor in this success was the data collected in a systematic manner by the SMS.

Another reason for systematic data collection is Monash’s obligations to quality agencies of host nations where it offers courses. In Malaysia, the National Higher Education Action Plan (NHEAP) requires universities to survey students on classroom teaching. Similarly, in South Africa the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) includes student surveys, impact studies, and benchmarking in their institutional audit criteria.

Another purpose of collecting student feedback is to improve learning experience and inform decisions regarding courses and units. In recent times this has been outweighed by assurance and accountability purposes.^{11,12,13}

Actions Taken

By developing the SMS, Monash established an approach to “closing the loop.” This was a critical step in the learning curve because prior to this system, survey results were not typically communicated back to the participants. Previous research findings argue that if students receive little or no feedback on actions taken as a result of their feedback, they may show a lack of interest in evaluations. This could eventually result in declining evaluation response rates.¹⁶ The SMS has allowed almost real-time data available to students on the Internet, thus demonstrating that their opinions are valued and important to the continuous improvement process.

An example of how student feedback changed university practices centers on the university-wide policy addressing timeliness and usefulness of assessment feedback. The policy recognized that students noted that they were not receiving feedback in time to incorporate improvements in subsequent assessments. This resulted in a policy that no further assessment could be submitted until feedback was received from the previously assessed piece of work.

One other critical action as a result of the SMS was the development of a reporting mechanism where changes are communicated back to various committees across the university. These committees have student representation, ensuring wide communication of changes across the student body, further strengthening the closure of the feedback loop.

Lessons Learned

Although the SMS has resulted in a number of benefits, there are factors to consider for the effective implementation of such a system.¹⁷ These include:

- Buy-in of senior management for such a system and the effectiveness in delivering the university’s strategic plans.
- Appropriate resourcing to achieve the goals of such a system.
- Commitment of senior management to implement quality as a result of the data across the institution.
- Organization-wide acceptance and coordinated use of data for decision making. Staff generally indicated that they were not trained to implement changes as a result of student feedback and need training on interpreting data as well as guidance for pedagogical changes that will improve the student experience.

- Student and other stakeholder engagement was a crucial component in effectively utilizing the SMS system and subsequent quality enhancement processes. This applies not only to this institution but also to other tertiary institutions. Therefore, a mechanism that would form a transparent link among evaluation, quality, and engagement needs to be built into the SMS system.

Concluding Remarks

An effective quality management system that enables enhancement relies not only on the efficacy of the institution’s evaluation system but also the commitment of leadership. Monash University demonstrated this by developing an integrated SMS, which enables quality improvement and makes data available to stakeholders and management in real time to aid decision making. The institution’s leaders played an integral part in providing necessary funds for implementing the system and demonstrating an ongoing commitment to engage with the data.

This experience has clear implications to other teaching and learning organizations regarding the effective collection and use of data to achieve an improvement in the student experience. It shows how systematic data collection changed university practices in assessment, reporting processes, and the use of data for benchmarking.

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