

<b>Subject</b>	Maintaining Quality within the Institution
<b>Module</b>	The Quality Cycle: Planning and Acting
<b>Topic</b>	2.2 Planning

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### 1. Introduction



Planning is a key aspect of an institution's approach to quality and is often thought of as the initial aspect of the quality cycle. In fact, any part of the quality cycle can be the site for work on quality: for example a REVIEW may be a spur to PLANNING and then a cycle of activity; a particular ACT may need to be MONITORED and thus activation of a cycle; finalising demonstration of IMPROVEMENT can be the initiator of a new round of PLANNING and so on.

This topic, *Planning*, describes the bases for a planning architecture and process, including the notion of a planning pyramid with long-term vision, medium-term strategic plans and shorter-term operational plans. Planning by operational level is also considered in terms of Institutional, Faculty, Department etc. plans. The need for activity area plans is also discussed (e.g. Teaching and Learning, Research and Research Training, Support Services, Inclusive Practices etc.).

#### Objectives: Planning

Upon completion of this topic, you should be able to

- conceptualise various aspects of planning in terms of time by using the planning pyramid
- discuss the need for activity area plans

### 2. Planning

Planning does tend to have an important position within institutions however, perhaps because Governing Councils/Boards expect to see a plan for future activity and details of where the institution is hoping to go, as a complement to approval of the budget. Linking the institution's resources through the budget to the plan makes sense, and in auditing higher education institutions, all Quality Agencies question how resources are allocated through the budget process to realise the objectives of the plan. Every institution has a planning unit, centre or division of some kind and for many institutions, planning is synonymous with quality. Planning units themselves often see planning as the central activity and other aspects of the quality cycle as peripheral to their work.

The need for planning is not universally accepted – failures of central Soviet and Chinese Socialist planning and Planning Programming Budgeting Systems in the

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United States are sometimes quoted by academics in particular to indicate the folly of planning (Birnbaum, 2000; Wildavsky, 1973; however, also see Alexander & Faludi, 1989). There is relatively little evidence that the resources expended by higher education institutions in planning results in the realisation of worthwhile goals, but whether this reflects on the virtues or vices of planning or on a lack of institutional clarity and rigour of what is being achieved at what costs remains a moot point (Massy, 2003). Also, planning in higher education institutions is not a science in any sense of the word, including being steeped in the accumulated knowledge of the discourse before embarking on the activity itself. In fact if planning is generally regarded as being so important to an institution, it is curious that it is often so poorly conceptualised. Like other parts of the institution, it is generally highly associated with the views of the Vice-Chancellor/President/CEO; every new Vice-Chancellor/President/CEO wants to stamp his or her view on the institution through a new plan and each has a view on what is necessary or unnecessary in terms of producing plans. This means that there are often cycles of planning, with a new Vice-Chancellor/CEO creating an elaborate set of plans, followed five years later by a new incumbent wanting to reduce the amount of wasted time and effort going into planning and thus having only a skeletal plan. Five years later again, a new leader finds the plans in place to be totally inadequate and starts a new and elaborate planning process. Much of the quality literature, like the literature on teaching and learning, is not generally studied or known by managers or teachers in the sector and therefore limited personal experience together with limited and ad hoc knowledge picked up through staff development activities, tend to be the foundation for action. Planning is particularly susceptible to this.

So what would a rational planning framework or architecture look like? One approach to this uses the device of a pyramid to conceptualise planning. A planning architecture needs to take account of time and 'reach.' Various kinds of plans need to be in place for various time periods.

The graphic below illustrates the planning pyramid. So if planning is imagined as a pyramid, at the base of the pyramid are the operational plans most institutions need to guide their activities and budget over at least the year ahead (although annual operational plans are often 3 year rolling plans with indicative targets for the subsequent two years). The next layer of the pyramid is the strategic plan which is a longer term plan (usually 3 – 5 years) needed to guide the annual operational plans. Many institutions have a concise Vision Statement concerning what the organisation will look like and what it will be in the longer term – often 15 to 25 years. While it could be argued that a vision statement is not really a plan, it is also logical to include the vision as the guiding document for other planning and therefore at the apex of a planning pyramid.

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Planning Pyramid

A planning pyramid therefore helps conceptualise various aspects of planning in terms of time: from short-term operational through medium-term strategic to long-term vision. The other major aspect of the planning architecture that needs consideration is 'reach' and the levels at which plans will be expected. While this is in some ways variable depending on the size of the institution, it remains a conceptual question for each institution to face. For example, if the institution has a vision statement, is it expected that each faculty will have one too? What about each Department? What about each Research Institute or Centre; each Support Service (e.g. Information Technology, Human Resources, Finance etc); each campus (if the institution is multi-campus); each area (e.g. teaching and learning, research and research training), each major committee (e.g. Occupational Health and Safety, Equity and Diversity etc). And that is just the vision, should each area also have a strategic plan responding to the institutional strategic plan and/or an annual operational plan?

Each institution needs to discuss and find its way through the issue of 'reach'. On one hand, there needs to be a clear and largely accepted view of where the institution is going (vision, strategy) which if anything is to be accomplished needs to be taken up and represented in the plans of major work areas and individuals. On the other, the institution needs to avoid paralysis by planning – that people are not spending disproportionate amounts of time and resources on planning rather than achieving results. Like many organisational quality issues, the outcome of this discussion will be political rather than technical or objective. The actual practice in many institutions has been for any planning activity involving staff to be seen as a waste of time and contrary to the academic enterprise. But it can also be argued that much academic activity is historical, ad hoc or in the interests of individuals rather than the organisation, and that successful organisations are those where individuals understand, respect and work towards shared organisational goals. To date it may be that paralysis by planning has been more of a myth to justify avoidance rather than an accurate reflection of reality. Of course, the other side of this is that planning may be unduly 'top down' and lacking in participation from the wider institutional community – where people are excluded from the process and see it as imposed from above, they are more likely to regard it as a waste of their time.

This points to the fact that there are more and less successful ways to go about planning. Planning often comes from a review or acknowledgement of directions that

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need to be taken that will simply not come about by themselves. Management retreats are often occasions for such conversations and these maybe at various levels – from senior management to faculty, departmental or area retreats. From here it is necessary to identify a person or group to take up the new directions, issues and emerging approaches identified and work towards the first draft of a plan. Many institutions have learned that to take a draft plan forward, it is then necessary to have multiple engagement strategies with stakeholders. To do this, firstly stakeholders need to be identified in the context of the particular plan but they would often include governance (e.g. Council), senior managers, academic staff, administrative staff, students, professional/discipline groups and employers.

Face-to-face meetings to gain feedback can be supplemented by surveys and other web-based interaction, for example, through web discussion groups. Having completed these initial phases of identification, development and feedback, an 'Exposure Draft' of a plan is often constructed and taken to all major stakeholder groups and through all relevant committees and groups. Following the further incorporation of feedback and checking that the new plan fits the planning framework and template of the institution, it can then be taken forward for approval. A communication strategy usually accompanies a new plan outlining how stakeholders will be informed about it and how its implementation will be communicated.

### 3. Discussion

#### Discussion: Planning

Consider the following key questions regarding Planning at your own (or choose one) institution:

- What is the planning architecture in terms of time: does it have the aspects of longer-term vision, medium-term strategy and short-term operations?
- How is the issue of reach addressed: at what levels are functional or area plans required?
- How are annual individual (staff) plans linked to vision and strategy?
- If you were recommending change in the area of planning, what would it be?

### 4. Summary

**This topic covered the following main points:**

- A planning architecture needs to take account of time and 'reach.' Various kinds of plans need to be in place for various time periods.
- A planning pyramid therefore helps conceptualise various aspects of planning in terms of time: from short-term operational through medium-term strategic to long-term vision. The other major aspect of the planning architecture that needs consideration is 'reach' and the levels at which plans will be expected.
- Governing Councils/Boards expect to see a plan for future activity and details of where the institution is hoping to go, as a complement to approval of the budget hence planning is seen to have an important position within the institution.