

Ensuring Institutional Quality through the Strategic Planning Framework

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'Quality assurance' and 'quality improvement' can be inherently embedded within all of a university's practices and processes through its planning framework. This paper will take an overarching view of strategic planning in a quality environment, and the activities that underpin it, by combining the traditional planning cycle of Plan–Do–Check–Act (PDCA) with the quality assessment process of Approach–Deployment–Results–Improvement (ADRI). Through the processes identified, a planning and quality framework may be developed with ten key steps identified and explained to place planning activities in a quality context. Discussion will also include examples of strategic planning good practice as identified from Australian Universities Quality Agency audit reports.

1. Introduction

'Quality assurance' and 'quality improvement' can be inherently embedded within all of a university's practices and processes. Through quality assurance an institution aims to assure an agreed standard for all activities, not only through established procedures and processes, but also through a commitment to understanding and attempting to meet the expectations of students and others. Quality improvement adds a further step, with a commitment to continually and proactively improve programs and services (Weeks, 1996).

This paper will take an overarching view of strategic planning in a quality environment and the activities that underpin it. By combining the commonly accepted planning cycle of Plan–Do–Check–Act (PDCA) and the quality assessment process of Approach–Deployment–Results–Improvement (ADRI), an institution can easily integrate 'quality' through its broad planning framework (see Table 1).

Table 1 Combining planning and quality cycles to support a planning and quality framework

Planning Cycle	Quality Cycle (AUQA, 2002)	Planning & Quality Framework: Key Steps
PLAN (planning our direction; what do we want to achieve)*	APPROACH (planning for quality; what do we want to achieve)*	1. Identify planning mechanisms: our approach to how we plan for our future and for quality. 2. Considering the internal and external environment, and develop a vision and strategic direction to provide the context for planning. 3. Develop objectives.
DO (what are we doing)*	DEPLOYMENT (how are we doing it)*	4. Develop strategies to achieve objectives. 5. Identify not only the activities/programs to achieve strategies, but more importantly 'how' they will be implemented (assuring quality) i.e. policies, processes and procedures. 6. Develop annual top-level planning timetable.
CHECK (reviewing against intentions)*	RESULTS (what are the outcomes)*	7. Develop guidelines and timetable for reviewing strategic plans (i.e. progress towards objectives; content). 8. Monitor and regularly review policies, processes and procedures to ensure quality outcomes. 9. Identify outcomes and demonstrate level of achievement against intentions.
ACT (what actions do we take as a result of review)*	IMPROVEMENT (learning and adapting)*	10. As a result of reviews, identify if any changes need to be made to: (i) strategic plans, and/or (ii) activities, policies, processes, procedures...in order to improve our outcomes and/or refine our direction and priorities.

Note: * Concept of bracketed explanations adapted from Tomlinson (2004).

Taking each of these ten key steps individually, planning activities can be identified in their quality context.

In general, there are many broadly interrelated components of strategic planning:

- institutional planning (development of plans, benchmarking, growth and profile modelling, monitoring performance, institutional research)
- resource planning (capital management planning, asset management, internal audit and risk management, modelling and planning of budget, human resources and IT)
- management information (development of management information systems and reporting software, identification, collection and reporting of relevant statistics for day-to-day operations and informing management, compliance with legislative obligations)
- policy development and review activities.

Ensuring appropriate processes and outcomes in each of these broad areas is part of the planning and quality assurance/quality improvement framework.

2. 'Planning' and 'Approach'

Point 1: Identify planning mechanisms and our approach to planning for our future and for quality. Key activities include:

- planning days at faculty and unit level
- annual university planning retreat with executive staff (including faculty deans and directors of non-faculty units)
- identification and implementation of strategic projects/activities which support a university's goals and priorities, in the context of a changing external environment
- risk management activities
- resource planning: university budget allocation process, ensuring linkage with planning objectives
- annual review of 'progress against objectives' identified in principle planning documents
- working parties to review university strategic plans (e.g. every three years)
- development of annual action plans for key committees.

Point 2: Considering the internal and external environment, develop a vision and strategic direction to provide the context for planning.

The university strategic plan provides the overall direction the university intends to take, with its vision, mission, guiding principles and overarching goals and strategies. The implementation of a university's goals is directed and focused by the institution's priorities, which are shaped to address current and emerging changes in the internal and external higher education environment.

Point 3: Develop objectives.

Below this top planning level are:

- core function strategic plans (e.g.) teaching and learning, research, internationalisation, community engagement
- faculty plans
- administrative and service unit business plans

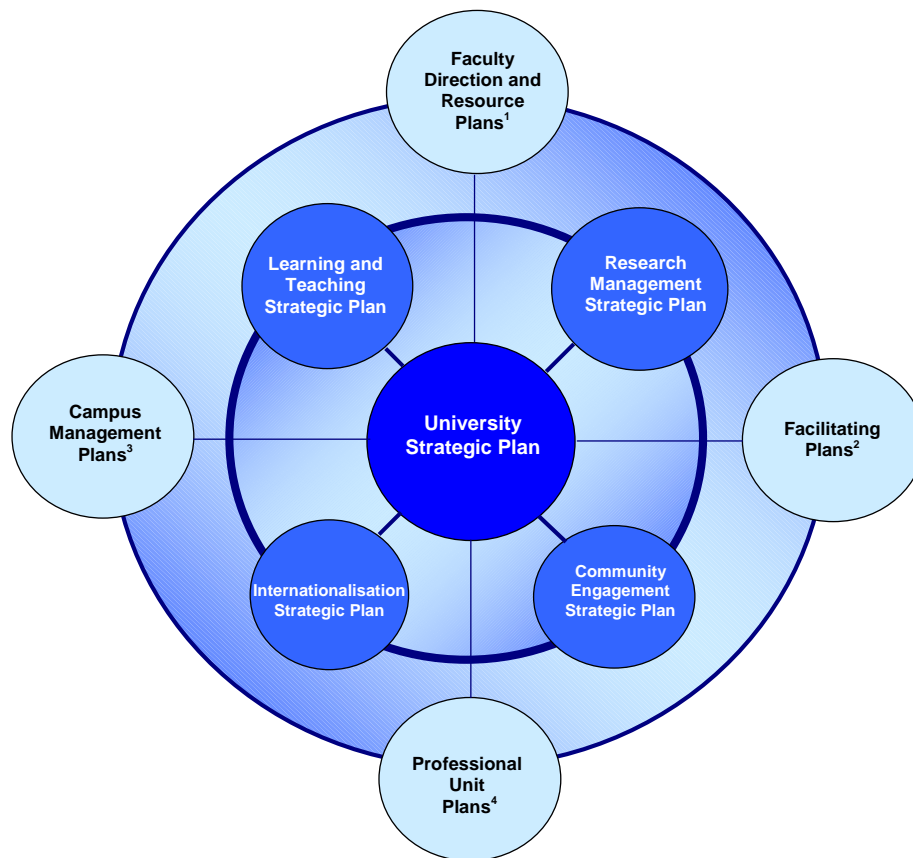
- campus management plans (including where an institution has more than one campus or centre)
- facilitating plans (e.g. IT, capital management, human resources, student equity).

The most important aspect of this planning is the linkage between all plans; none can be considered ‘standalone’. Figure 1 demonstrates these linkages.

In ensuring quality outcomes, the objectives of the core function plans directly relate to goal/s identified in the university strategic plan. By the same token, faculty plans address each objective in each core function plan (see Figure 2). This not only ensures linkage, but also supports the review process for core function plans: faculty objectives and strategies demonstrate how core function objectives are being implemented; annual review of progress against faculty objectives also demonstrates progress against core function objectives.

The linkages between faculty plans, admin and service unit plans, facilitating plans, campus plans and core function plans are less clear due to their differing purposes; however, all should support progress towards achieving the university’s goals. In addition to ensuring linkage and compatibility of objectives, resource and budget allocation processes need to be taken into consideration to facilitate achievement of objectives.

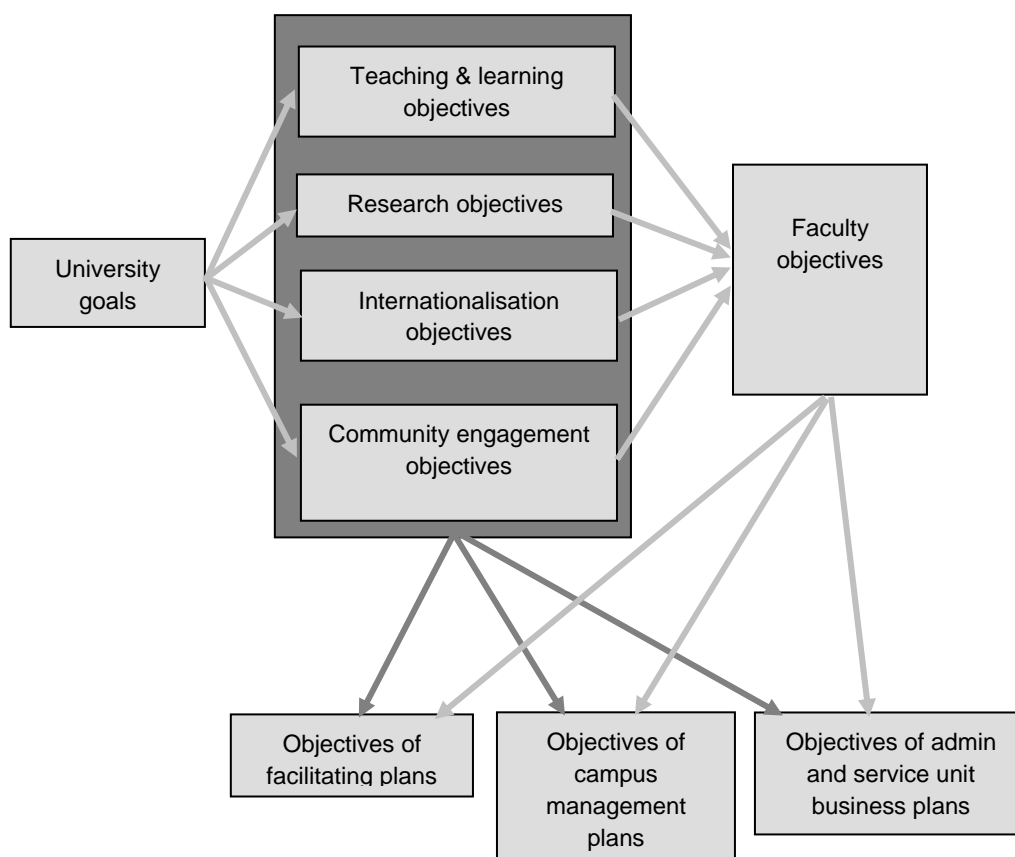
Figure 1 Linkages between plans



KEY

<p>Setting the overall intention of the University and articulating the Vision, Mission, Values and general Goals.</p>	<p>Core Function Plans: Setting direction in core functional areas.</p>	<p>Aggregations of similar Plans that identify specific actions to achieve the objectives of the core function plans and University goals.</p>
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Figure 2 **Linking objectives**



3. 'Do' and 'Deployment'

Point 4: Develop strategies to achieve objectives.

The key to good strategies, especially at the broad institutional level, is ensuring they can translate into actual activities and/or resource allocation to support the achievement of objectives (see Figure 3). If you can't nominate an action, person or unit responsible, timeframe and expected outcome, the strategy should not be included in your plan.

Figure 3 **The connection between objectives, strategies and tasks**

<p>Objective 1: xxx</p> <p>1.1 Strategy to achieve objective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example of activities and resources
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Point 5: Identify not only the activities/programs to achieve strategies, but more importantly how they will be implemented, i.e. policies, processes and procedures.

Different institutions have different models for overseeing the development, implementation, monitoring and review of their plans; however, central to all models is the status of existing policies and procedures. Changing circumstances or new initiatives or improvements to existing strategies (as a result of review) may necessitate the review of existing policies and/or procedures, or the development of new ones. This process is best guided by institution-based guidelines for the regular review and development of all of its policies, supported by an environment that facilitates the updating of existing procedures to meet current circumstances.

A communication strategy may also come into play at this point, ensuring that relevant stakeholders (e.g. staff, students) know about policies, expected procedures, Plans, review and reporting mechanisms.

Point 6: Develop annual top-level strategic planning timetable.

Develop appropriate annual timetabling for key strategic activities that support the planning process, including:

- annual review and update of priorities and strategic activities to support the university's goals
- annual university planning retreat
- faculty, department/school, admin and service unit 'planning days' or meetings
- faculty, admin and service unit development of faculty plans and/or business plans
- government and agency reporting schedules
- university budget and resource allocation process (including consideration of faculty and unit objectives, activity based cost modelling, performance modelling, notional budget review, submission to university council)
- review schedules (e.g. faculty, departments/schools, subjects, course, unit)
- reporting schedules:
 - end of year central committee reviews of: (i) activities against terms of reference; (ii) annual action plans
 - committees with responsibility for overseeing university and core function plans to prepare end of year report to council on progress against their respective plan objectives
- faculty and admin and service units to annually review progress against their plan and update their plan for the coming year.

4. 'Check' and 'Results'

Point 7: Develop guidelines and timetable for reviewing strategic plans.

Guidelines for the review process identify: (i) expectations and process; (ii) who has responsibility for undertaking the review (e.g. working party, specific unit, committee, etc.); (iii) a timetable (in a quickly changing environment—a 10-year plan may become obsolete halfway through, so it is more usual to consider 2–5 year plans); (iv) an outline for action on review findings.

Point 8: Monitor and regularly review policies, processes and procedures to ensure quality outcomes.

Just as for the review of strategic plans, guidelines for monitoring and reviewing a host of other key activities are necessary. These include, for example: monitoring and review of policies to ensure continued relevance and useability; subject and course reviews; faculty, school, department and unit reviews; committee reviews of core academic processes.

Point 9: Identify outcomes and demonstrate the level of achievement against intentions.

The review of the activities and plans facilitates the identification of outcomes against the intended objective/purpose.

5. 'Act' and 'Improvements'

Point 10: As a result of reviews, identify if any changes are to be made to: (i) strategic plans, and/or (ii) activities, policies, processes, procedures, in order to improve our outcomes and/or refine our direction and priorities.

Through the processes identified within this report, a planning and quality framework may be developed. In addition, improvements from recommendations and good practice examples from Australian Universities Quality Agency audit reports, regarding institutional strategic planning, can be integrated.

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