Integrated Approach to Planning at Monash

Natalie Mitchell, Monash University

Abstract

Universities periodically undertake a strategic planning process with the goal of improving their effectiveness (Lietzel et al. 2004). Typically, the process takes one of two forms: it can redirect or recast the institution in fundamental ways or it can focus on the things that it is doing especially well and organize the future around them. The integrated planning approach at Monash University is an example of the second type of approach to strategic planning.

In the Australian Universities Quality Agency’s (AUQA’s) Report of an audit of Monash University, Monash received a commendation for the development of its vision and for embedding and generating support for this within the organisation. A second commendation was received for the development and implementation of the university key performance indicators. Also, an affirmation was given to the University for recognising the need to focus on embedding planning at school and department level and that the Academic Heads Conference was an important mean of achieving this.

These commendations and affirmation reflect the integrated approach to planning at Monash; the key aspects of which are considered in this paper. It outlines the process by which Monash University reshaped its vision statement and strategic directions and consideration is given to the mechanisms that were put in place to generate support for and embed these directions within the organisation. Finally, the paper sets out some of the key factors in the success of this approach.

Background

Monash University is Australia’s largest university with nearly 55,000 students and more than 6000 staff. It has eight campuses serving diverse geographical locations: three metropolitan, two outer urban, one regional and two overseas (Malaysia and South Africa); and a centre in Prato, Italy. Monash is a research intensive university and belongs to the Group of Eight (Go8). Within Monash there is great diversity with some parts subscribing to older, more traditional academic values including theoretical research; other parts look to the business world and applied research as their model. It covers a broad range of disciplines and is organised into ten faculties: Art and Design; Arts; Business and Economics; Education; Engineering; Information Technology; Law, Medicine, Nursing and Health Science; Pharmacy; and Science.

As such, Monash has complex and diverse operational requirements. A notable feature of the University is its devolved management structure, which provides considerable autonomy at both faculty and campus levels. This devolved system of management has meant central institutional planning needs to be embedded into the business processes of faculties, departments and administrative units across the university.

The university draws approximately 40% of its income directly from Commonwealth Government grants. However, a significant proportion of income is drawn from student fees and, in particular, international student fees. Nearly one third of its student body is international full fee-paying students, which are mainly drawn from Malaysia, Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia and India. As such the university is acting, not just on a state or national stage, but internationally. It competes for students (and staff) with European, North American, New Zealand as well as other Australian universities. Global competition has seen the emergence of world university rankings, such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (Shanghai Jiao Tong index) and Times Higher Education Supplement, which have a demonstrable impact on the university’s reputation.

As such, Monash finds itself in an increasingly competitive environment. The Commonwealth Government fosters this by making fee assistance available to all domestic students, no longer just those attending
publicly funded institutions, and through its support of international private providers. The developing higher education sectors in South East Asia, China and India are improving services available to their own nationals and are seeking a greater share of the international student market. European universities, through the Bologna process, are reorganising their systems to encourage greater student mobility and portability of qualifications, which will ultimately increase their attractiveness to students from all parts of the world.

Within Australia, universities are seeking out new approaches to higher education and are being actively encouraged by the Commonwealth Government to do so. Some universities are looking at new models for delivering coursework, such as the “3+2+3” model being adopted by the University of Melbourne in 2008. Others are looking at reshaping their profiles in order to maximise their position in relation to the Research Quality Framework exercise.

In such a turbulent environment the need for a robust vision for the institution and a clear sense of its values is more important than ever. To underpin this, Monash has developed an integrated planning and performance monitoring framework.

**Developing the Monash Vision**

Leading up to the AUQA audit, Monash conducted an institutional self-review in 2002. One of the key findings in the report, *Still Learning*, was that the vision and strategic directions of the university were not well known throughout the organisation. Of those staff familiar with the strategic directions, it was evident that not all necessarily understood or supported some of the key themes.

In response, Monash initiated a review of its vision and strategic directions, with a view to a refocussing or re-emphasis of direction rather than a complete change. In establishing the process, consideration was given to the internal workings of Monash, and, in particular, the diversity inherent in the university and how best to develop commitment to a revised plan among this diverse group.

The initial phase consisted of extensive consultation and discussion on the strategic directions:

- Selected experts in thematic areas were brought together to discuss contextual issues and feasibility in the broad sense. The thematic groups included teaching and learning, research, internationalisation, development, campus coordination and facilities and services. Each group analysed the current contextual situation of Monash, the likely future of higher education over the next twenty years and what part Monash wanted in this future

- A steering group was appointed to draw together the results of each group’s discussion.

- A major environmental scan was conducted to analyse the current internal state of Monash and an external scan, which examined social, demographic, higher education, economic, political and technological trends.

- Feedback was received from steering groups who oversaw the university operations or activities in particular global regions and/or countries.

- Feedback was received from industry bodies and professional associations, which was channelled through academic departments and faculties.

During this period, several concurrent activities were conducted which provided a rich source of information, discussion and wider consultation:

- In preparation for the AUQA audit (conducted in 2006), Monash established self-review panels in the areas of research and internationalism. Each panel consulted with staff and students on each campus and submissions were sought and received from individuals and groups within the university. Reports and recommendations for improvements were made and these informed thought on the strategic direction.
On each Australian campus, campus planning committees were established and tasked with developing campus plans. These committees sought feedback from external stakeholders such as state and local government, the local community and industry groups.

A campus planning steering group, who co-ordinated the results of the campus planning committees, investigated other models of organisation for multi-campus universities.

Initial drafts of the revised plan were examined by the Vice-Chancellor’s Group (VCG) (comprising the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellors and Vice-Presidents), then by other senior university committees, including Senior Management Committee, Committee of Deans and Academic Board. Feedback on the drafts was also sought from students and staff on all of the university’s campuses.

Production of the final statement involved an iterative process of drafting and circulation for comment. This was done for the purpose of aligning and realigning the different views and values.

The generation of discussion and debate and altering of text based on feedback received should not be under-estimated as a way of developing support for and commitment to strategic directions.

Although the VCG had overall responsibility for defining the strategic directions and extensive discussion and consultation within the university community occurred, final approval for the revised plan rested with the University Council.

The final document, Monash Directions 2025, a 20-year strategic directions statement, emphasised Monash’s values and established broad directions and aims for the university, which can be best summarised as:

By 2025 we will be one of the best universities in the world, distinctive because our research-intensive, international focus enables us to address important theoretical and practical challenges, and develop graduates who will wish to do the same.

Embedding the Monash Vision

A formal communication strategy was developed to introduce Monash Directions 2025. At the introductory stage, this included a series of presentations at all campuses, the distribution of hard copies and a permanent web presence for the statement and related documents.

However, it was recognised that a one-off communication strategy was not sufficient to generate support for and embed the vision into the university. A number of ongoing strategies were adopted and include development of a comprehensive planning framework, performance monitoring through the use of performance indicators and the use of Senior Management Summit and Academic Heads conferences. Each of these is considered in more detail below.

Planning Framework

Monash’s planning framework set out the various layers of plans within the university, including the timeframes and review timelines for each plan. It is represented by a planning pyramid (Appendix 1), which displays the interconnections between the plans and explains how the subsidiary plans relate to the core ideas set out in Monash Directions 2025.

Monash Directions 2025 is underpinned by the Academic Plan, consisting of plans for research and research training, education and international portfolios. For each portfolio, there are a series of goals, objectives, strategies, actions, outcomes, key performance indicators, targets and responsibilities. Each goal relates to one or more of the aims in Monash Directions 2025.

Goals in the Academic Plan that are applicable at the university-wide level are operationalised through the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) responsible for the area. Other goals in the Academic Plan are operationalised
at a faculty or divisional level. The details of the actions required to achieve these goals are set out in the operational plans for the faculty or division.

Campus direction statements outline how each campus will develop over a ten year time frame. They are fully aligned with Monash Directions 2025 and relate closely to the Academic Plan.

Resources plans are developed to reinforce the strategic plan and provide detailed strategies and targets in information technology, finance, human resources, facilities and services.

At the beginning of each year, faculties and campuses provide VCG with an assessment of their performance for the previous year. They are required to relate their performance to their own individual goals and targets and to the university’s strategic directions and annual priorities. They are provided with faculty-level data for university-wide performance indicators and are asked to comment on their performance. Faculties, campuses and VCG co-operatively develop follow-up and/or new goals and targets for the upcoming year. These goals are aligned with the strategic directions and the Academic Plan. Each of the key objectives is referenced against key university plans and priorities and must link to relevant measures/targets, including university key performance indicators. They also provide a short description of planning processes within the faculty which aims to encourage embedding of planning at the operational level. Budget setting is carried out alongside operational planning, with the plans informing budget planning and allocation.

The Annual Plan and Budget focuses on key high level university-wide objectives and strategies. Again, it aligns with the Academic Plan and support plans and university-wide performance indicators. This document is the key statements of the university’s specific goals for the coming year and the allocation of resources to achieve them. In the middle of the following year, a review of progress in implementing the relevant Annual Plan takes place, and any necessary adjustments are made.

**Performance Indicators**

AUQA has commended Monash University for the development and implementation of the university key performance indicators as a means of monitoring its performance systematically against the strategic directions throughout the university.

Monash’s university-wide performance indicators are a set of metrics designed to measure the extent to which university-wide objectives are being achieved. These reflect matters of strategic importance to the university and provide a guide to the university’s progress and assist in deciding how the university should use its resources to reach its goals.

The university monitors a number of key and internal performance indicators (KPIs and IPIs). KPIs are derived from data that are: publicly available, accepted across the sector, enable time series evaluation, enable comparison with the Go8 and sector wide standards.

IPIs are either the main drivers and/or lead indicators for KPIs. These are used at the VCG portfolio level and reflect objectives within the Academic and resource plans.

For each performance indicator, stretch targets are identified. This enables the university to gauge whether its aspirations are being met and. The data is presented using a ‘dashboard’ with green meaning meeting aspirations, amber meaning needing improvement and red meaning needing critical attention. This presentation has been very effective in communicating the university’s movement towards meeting its aims. AUQA stated that the stretch targets are a clear stimulus for staff to improve their performance.

**Communicating About the Monash Vision**

**Academic Heads Conferences**

In 2002, the *Still Learning* report identified that planning at the sub-faculty level was variable.
“We recommend the encouragement of planning at school, departmental and unit level, with heads having access to staff development and incentives to lead operational planning for their units”.

As part of the development and implementation of Monash Directions 2025, the university considered how to embed the vision and strategic directions at all levels of the institution. Two initiatives sought to address this.

Firstly, Monash developed a generic planning template which provides a guide to the key elements in an operational plan. It includes a section for evaluating performance against previous plans. In developing objectives, it emphasises the need to cross reference relevant university wide plans and again reinforces the need for performance measures and that these be consistent with the university-wide performance indicators.

Secondly, Monash holds an annual Academic Heads conference, which is intended to foster understanding of institution-wide plans to ensure the university’s strategies and priorities are reflected in departmental management of education and research, human, financial and other resources. The conference provides detailed briefings on strategic directions and encourages discussion of the implications of these at an enterprise wide level.

This approach received an affirmation in AUQA’s quality audit of Monash:

“AUQA affirms Monash University’s recognition of the need to focus on embedding planning at school and department level and that the introduction of the Conference for Academic Heads as a recurrent annual event is an important means of achieving this goal”.

Senior Management Summit

The university continuously reviews it plans and finds way to strengthen these. One strategy to achieve this is an annual Senior Management Summit, which engenders discussion on institution-wide planning and provides networking and integration opportunities across various sections of the university.

It provides an opportunity for senior managers in the university to: evaluate the performance of the university in previous year; consider emerging issues and how these might impact on university plans; and consider specific actions for forthcoming years. These identified actions are reflected in the faculty and campus operational plans as well as the university’s Annual Plan.

It is an opportunity not only to evaluate but also to receive feedback and achieve consultation on institutional directions as well as for reinforcing and embedding university goals and objectives throughout the organisation.

Conclusion

Monash has developed an integrated approach to planning. The development of Monash University’s vision, strategic objective and key performance indicators were all linked as is the continuing process of embedding these within the university. The effectiveness of this approach is reflected in the AUQA audit report which commends and affirms aspects of university planning and performance monitoring.

The key factors in the success of this approach are ensuring that:

- planning does not sit in a vacuum. Monash’s vision and strategic directions are continuously re-emphasised. All plans are aligned and linked to each other. Operational planning is linked to the budget process;

- planning is not a one off activity. Monash uses a quality cycle of ‘Plan, Act, Evaluate and Improve’ to inform its operations, including university planning. Plans are subjected to an annual cycle of evaluation
and are adjusted if appropriate. The dialogue within the university continues through the Senior Management Summit, Academic Heads Conference and through the operational planning activities;

- key performance indicators reflect the strategic directions of the university and these are communicated to the university so that there can be no doubt as to what direction the university is heading and how it is performing; and

- the senior leadership show a commitment to vision and strategic objectives and reinforce this through the planning process and allocation of resources.

The university continues to review its plans and planning framework to find ways to strengthen this integrated approach and its implementations within the university.

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