# Quality Control at Think Tanks

A Flexible Approach

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**R4D RESULTS FOR DEVELOPMENT**

# Situation Today

- What's the fuss?  We all have QC programs.

- Actually, many programs exist more on paper or in sketchy notes than as operating systems.  Data I have for 59 think tanks in transition and developing countries shows that only half had a written QC statement.

- Sometimes such statement call for stringent standards for all products but are too costly and too time consuming to use.  Result: official procedures are not followed.  "Work arounds" are being employed.

- Needed: a flexible system that covers all products but allocates relatively more resources to those products likely to contribute to policy development and otherwise influence significate outcomes.

# Components of any QC System

**The review process is documented in a written statement covering:**

1. the range of products subject to review;
2. the general intensity of the review, perhaps varying for different author/product combinations;
3. the person responsible for designating reviewers and review intensity for each product to be reviewed;
4. form in which comments are to be provided; what is really helpful for the author?
5. process for resolving possible disputes between the reviewer and the author(s).
6. Enforcement: how to assure reviews are done.  Absolutely critical.

# 1. What products get reviewed?

- Reports to clients
- Papers for conference presentation
- Papers being submitted to journals??
- Books proposed for publication??

- Articles for the popular press
- Documents for press conferences
- Policy papers and memos prepared for government officials, MPs, int'l donors
- Blog posts—in-house blogs, others

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# 2. Who are the reviewers?

- Key qualification is the expertise to do the review
  - Methodological knowledge (e.g., statistical techniques used)
  - Policy/sector knowledge
- In-house staff is generally preferred but technical qualifications come first

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# 3. Who Selects the Reviewer?

- Assuming your researchers are organized in teams, the selector is the Team Leader.

- If the Team Leader is one of the investigators or researchers are not in teams, then the Vice-President for Research, if one, or the Executive Director.

- Reviewer selection depends in part on the expected importance of the report's findings. [next slide]

**This is the time to determine the likely interest in the results and by whom and to invite the communications team to join in design the roll out.**

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# 4. Intensity of the Review: A Flexible Quality Control System

**The guiding principle is that all products are reviewed consistent with three factors:**

- The product's visibility and importance to the institute's reputation

- The author's or presenter's experience **and** the organization's experience with a particular analyst

- Whether the product to be reviewed is based on another one that has already been reviewed., e.g., reviewing a policy brief based on an approved technical report.

# Three Levels of a Product's Importance to the Institution

1. Institutional importance: Reputation of the organization could be at risk.

2. High importance.  Major visibility for the product; particularly complex or risky analysis involved; or politically sensitive conclusions.

3. More routine report or presentation.

# Illustration: Review of Presentations

As noted, guidelines for all _products_ are organized by the 3 importance levels.

Highest level of importance => **Institutional level importance.  The TTs reputation could be significantly damaged by a poor quality presentation.**

- **Experienced researcher and presenter:**  Presenter meets with senior management and perhaps topic expert to review conclusions and policy recommendations; _usually_ a practice presentation.

- **Less experienced staff:**  Presenter goes through the presentation, likely using a Power Point deck (or hand-out for the minister), with senior management with emphasis on conclusions and policy recommendations. Practice presentation is standard.

# Review intensity for presentations of high importance

**High importance:  There is (a) major visibility for the presentation, or (b) particularly complex or risky analysis is involved or (c) conclusions likely to be politically sensitive**

- Experienced researcher and presenter. Presenter meets with <u>senior colleague</u> to review conclusions and policy recommendations.  Reviewer should check that recommendations do not go beyond evidence.

- Less experienced staff. Presenter walks through the presentation, likely using Power Point deck, with <u>senior colleague</u> with emphasis on conclusions and policy recommendations.  Reviewer can ask for practice presentation if has any concerns.

# Illustration concluded

## More routine presentation

E.g., seminar for the think tank community; presentation for the government office that administers a particular program.

- Experienced researcher and presenter. None. (Assumes the TT is familiar with the presenter's past performance and it is rated as "very strong.")

- Less experienced staff. Presenter meets with senior colleague to review conclusions and policy recommendations OR does a full "dry run" presentation for a few staff (perhaps more than once).

## 5. **Written products: What should reviewers look for beyond technical proficiency?**

- Consistency with Terms of Reference (TOR)
- Clarity about what was actually done
- All conclusions based squarely on the analysis and facts presented
- Policy implications spelled out *and* supported by the analysis
- Policy Brief: sufficient to understand what was done?

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# Review Check List for Policy Research Reports

## Part 1: Problem Definition & Analysis

1. Issue definition
   1. Well-defined; policy importance clear?
   2. Stated hypothesis that is subject to analysis
   3. All relevant aspects included?
2. Literature review—domestic, international sources
3. Right information and data assembled?
4. Analytic methods appropriate
5. Report well-organized, clearly written

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# What is Gained from the Literature Review?

1. Has it already been done?
   a. But it still may be worthwhile:  reason to believe behavior in your country is different and you have the relevant data to test
   b. Maybe you have a better data set.

2. Check the way the problem/issue is formulated
   a. Ideas for better structure of your analysis, setting up problem
   b. Place the work in context . Essential for journal publication.

3. Estimation techniques and issues
   a. Example: Censored data in estimating probability models

# Review Check List for Policy Research Reports—Part 2: Conclusions

1. Based squarely on paper's findings?
2. If government program recommended
   a. Cost estimate
   b. Administrative feasibility, cost discussed
3. Reasonable range of options considered, not just one idea
4. Full policy implications of analysis drawn out and realistic ideas for improvement given
5. Where appropriate, ideas for additional analysis, data collection?

# 5. Dispute resolution

- Who should resolve?
  - May depend on whether the dispute is over a technical issue or a policy issue; external expert may be needed on technical issues
  - Obvious candidate is head of the organization in small think tanks; department head in larger think tanks
- Keep discussion strictly professional
  - Collegial, not adversarial
  - Try to avoid winners and losers
- Does not occur very often

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# 6. Enforcement

- **No ignorance:**
  - Where new or revised policy being developed, discuss draft & final policy statement with staff
  - On going: Give copy of policy to all researchers (new hires)

- **Team leaders:  Track products/events**
  - Tracking triggers reviews; helps ensure adequate time for reviews
  - For documents that are not deliverables, researchers must inform team leaders on the schedule when they make a commitment.

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# Administering a QC System

**Critical.  Incidence of weak systems is high and it is caused by a combination of unrealistic review guidelines and poor oversight.**

- To be successful need a system that can hold managers responsible, which means their formally vouching for an appropriate review being done for each product from their group.  Urban Institute form for Review and Release Form in documents on line.

- Ensuring compliance:  find a critical point that at least written products must pass through:  acceptance for website posting; preparation of letter transmitting reports.

- Must be clear on who decides on the intensity of each review.

- Consistent standards are important—see handout.

- Use a standard form. Good places for a "check box" indicating the review done are
  - on the form sending a product to communications for posting on a website
  - on a form that sends reports to your contracts office or executive director for transmission to a client or an external audience.

  *You will know what will work in your institute.*

# Conclusions

- QC is a necessity, not a frill
- Establish a formal system, one that fits your needs
- Credibility of a system with the staff requires
  - Consistency
    - All the products in the designated categories
    - All researchers
  - Objectivity and fairness of reviews

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