Assessment of Quality in Student Support Services:
A Reflective View Point

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Abstract

Quality is one of buzz words of the 90s. The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the meaning of the term quality and to examine a number of implications for the relationship between quality and student services. In particular we draw a distinction in the current debate by referring to the metaphors of the "passenger" and the "driver" approach to quality and evaluation in student services. We will draw upon a phenomenographic methodology to explicate the notion of goodness or worth as these terms relate to student support services. Finally, we argue for a radical shift in our concept of quality. This shift requires that we return to the providers and the people who use our service to ask them to articulate the nature of goodness in the provision of services. We illustrate the relation between worthiness and student support services being responsive to its ability to ensure client's satisfaction with the assistance provided, the professionalism of the staff and its ability to facilitate changes in the client's behaviour.

Our initial interest in quality was founded upon a shared enthusiasm for the new "religion" of the 90s. Like many, we have since gained some experience in developing and implementing quality concepts in student support services. This experience has resulted in our initial enthusiasm being replaced by a greater degree of reflection and consideration of the real benefits of adopting traditional quality concepts and processes within the Australian University context.

The purpose of this paper is thus three-fold:

A  To outline the basis of our initial enthusiasm and some of the initiatives and procedures which we adopted in response to the "quality" imperative;

B  To describe our critical response to our initiatives and our reflections upon current understandings of quality, and finally

C  To provide some pointers for the future development of quality in student support services.


A  Initial enthusiasm

Our initial and somewhat uncritical enthusiasm for the ethos of quality was driven in no small part by the seeming unfolding of a new language giving rise to such concepts as:

- Quality
- Performance indicators
- Accountability
- Benchmarking
- Total quality management

Furthermore, this language appeared to be linked to financial incentives ... always a strong motivator.

The notion of quality, quality assurance, total quality management and continuous improvement, is, of course, not new. The notion of continuous improvement is often associated with the "kaizen" ethos adopted by Toshiba soon after the second world war, and the work by Deming and the articulation of the Deming cycle, in the early 1950s. Total Quality Management was then adopted by a number of companies in the private sector in the USA during the late 1970s and similarly, made inroads in Australia at about the same time, predominantly in the manufacturing sector, then later in the service sector.
To place this enthusiasm within the Australian university context, the Minister responsible for Higher Education, Mr Baldwin, announced in late 1992 that quality audits of Australian Universities would be conducted and a Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQHAE) established. The proposed committee would be set up with a wide ranging membership and would recommend the disbursement of $75m of incentive funds. Following a Federal Election, the proposal was revived by Mr Kim Beazley, the new Minister of Employment, Education and Training in May 1993 which resulted in the setting up of the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

Drawing upon the 1993 DEET document "Student Support Services: Management, Delivery and Effectiveness" we educated ourselves about formal performance indicators relating to student support services which encompassed:

- Professional/support staff ratios
- Student/staff ratios
- Length of time on waiting list
- Average time spent servicing each client
- Service activity cost:  
  a) per total student population
  b) per student seen
- Student access rate
- Service product range
- Value added services

A number of performance indicators were also put forward by the above DEET report which related to the service role and to student needs within student support services. Service role performance indicators might comprise:

- Participation in university policy development
- Degree and depth of multi-site servicing
- Participation in wider community activities

Client/student needs performance indicators might comprise:

- Awareness of and access to services
- User satisfaction with service
- Student demand
- Usage patterns
- Flexibility and responsiveness
- Innovation and openness
- Consistency of quality service delivery
- Noticeable difference (measure of the impact on students of accessing the service).

Following the argument put forward by some university administrators on the merits of quality assessment and to avoid quality assurance systems being imposed upon our services, we decided to take the initiative and adopt or develop and implement both quantitative and qualitative indicators of quality.

Following intense discussion we introduced client evaluation forms which we routinely sent to our clients and requested their feedback on the services. These forms required clients to rate their level of satisfaction with various aspects of the service provided. We asked students to rate their response to such questions as: "I achieved my purposes in attending counselling" and we assumed a positive response was equated with a "good" service. We also asked clients to provide some qualitative data regarding the positive and negative aspects of their experience with the service. We
also developed criterion ratings and examined the responses we received from clients in relation to our own criteria ratings. We spent many a staff hour discussing strategic plans, missions and total quality management and developing Plan - Do - Check - Act cycles for "continuously improving quality".

Two questions need to be asked. Firstly, do the procedures outlined above relate to quality and secondly, did the activities described result in an enhancement to our service?

B A critical response

To answer the first question we need to first ask "what is quality"? We are indebted to a number of writers in this field for informing our understanding of quality. We recall a letter written by Sullivan to The Australian (17/8/94) in which she writes:

\begin{quote}
V.S. Naipaul, in his book An Area of Darkness, which described his baffling first encounter with his ancestral homeland, India, recounted an incident in which he complained to the management of his hotel that the toilets were filthy. He was told that this could not possibly be the case - someone was employed to clean the toilets. Officially they were clean and he must be mistaken. So the toilets remained dirty.
\end{quote}

We are particularly indebted to Don Margetson for drawing our attention to the distinction between quality as an attribute and quality as a value, that is, between a description and an evaluation.

As we review the increasing examples of "quality speak", we have become increasingly aware of a general confusion in relation to the usage associated with the term quality in relation to the above definitions, as well as a paradigm shift taking place within universities.

Some examples of quality talk are as follows:

\begin{quote}
Quality assurance can be used to help us meet these challenges by identifying our customers and determining what is required to keep improving our service to them. It can be used to give our customers - our students, employers and the community - confidence that we will do what we say we will do. (Ref)
\end{quote}

A senior academic was quoted as stating:

\begin{quote}
I think quality assurance should be an integral part of our working lives. I don't have a problem with calling students 'clients' at all. If we don't know who our clients are, then we don't know what our business is... Those who already are committed to critically challenging the way they operate have no problem with the quality agenda. It's only those who want to be left alone, who don't want to change, who don't want to be challenged who object to the quality concept. (Inside QUT, No. 122, September 13 - October 3, 1994.)
\end{quote}

These brief examples of the usage of the term quality and "quality talk" signify the paradigm shift inherent in the quality debate in which students are referred to as customers and clients and the role of the University is referred to as a business. Baldwin (1994) describes the paradigm shift inherent in the quality debate, as a process of "colonization" by the interrelated cultures of business, industry and advertising. The shift from a collegial to a business oriented management style is seen as representing a fundamental undermining of the traditional discourse of university culture. This shift is particularly striking in the above examples, where the term quality has become reified to the point where we have appointments to such positions as a "Pro Vice Chancellor - Quality" and a Professor of Quality. The question might be asked - quality of what?

We would argue that universities have always been involved in a process of critical thinking and self reflection. In other words, universities have traditionally been concerned with the merit or "goodness" of their work in various disciplines as well as the management of their resources. Furthermore, the not too subtle shift in language from student, from the latin, studere, to study with zeal or passion, to customer, whose needs we satisfy to make a profit or client - one who listens to advice, undermines the traditional values of scholarly enquiry and a critical search for truth.

We thus became increasingly critical of our own work in this field ie. to what extent do the results of our own endeavours to assess quality enhance the support services which we provide to our students or do our efforts fall into the same trap as we have alluded to above, that is; do our efforts simply provide a response to the university hierarchy and administrators who after all are
responsible for funding the service? That is, we are not critical of the notion of quality in terms of positive evaluation but we are concerned about the uncritical application of indices of quality which purport to be objective when the very nature of quality is itself value laden.

C Some pointers for the future

The 1994 Boyer lectures by Kerry Stokes, concerning information super highways confronted us with the comment and questions: "There are two ways of travelling. Are we going to travel as a driver ... or as the driven, that is, as passengers on someone else's train"? (24/11/94)

We wish to argue that this statement has equal import for the debate in Australia on quality within the university sector. In particular, we can compare these two approaches, outlined by Stokes, in relation to the quality debate along several dimensions: motivation, epistemology, language and evaluation.

**DIAGRAM 1 GOES ABOUT HERE**

The "passenger" approach is generally extrinsically motivated. Evaluation is often undertaken to please administrators or, at worst, for symbolic purposes to show that we are current with administrative procedures held up as being "good". The epistemological basis of this approach is most often quantitative, thus relying upon an objectivist view of knowledge. Consonant with this view, the target group will often be referred to as "clients" or "customers" reflecting modern managerial practices. The operation is about providing a service to paying customers. The language is thus characterised by objectivation, functions and processes as illustrated by performance indicators, benchmarks and more recently accreditation. Persons working within organisations which have adopted a "passenger" approach will very often think about quality and evaluation in terms of the metaphors and concepts of industrial production and marketing.

The alternative approach referred to in this paper as the "driver" approach, is intrinsically motivated and depends upon the individual or groups of individuals taking charge of the process. The epistemological basis of such an approach will very often be constructivist in that there is a focus upon the meaning of services provided both for the provider and the person utilising the service. In this context such persons might be referred to a student in recognition of their real status ie the derivative of the term student, studere, is to learn with passion or zeal. The language of analysis might be derived from aesthetics with its emphasis upon qualitative assessment and value judgments. The evaluative system adopted by the "driver" approach will be consonant with the purpose and culture of academic institutions. As such, the evaluation of quality involves expert judgment based upon a detailed knowledge of the field and draws upon quantitative indicators, but only as guides to judgement.

We believe the above distinctions allow us to better address three key questions which are:

1. What is the meaning of quality and quality practice?
2. How do we establish standards of practice and measure performance?
3. What are the likely benefits and costs to the consumer?

**DIAGRAM 2 GOES ABOUT HERE**

We wish to argue that the two approaches to quality outlined above result in some significant differences in relation to the objectives relating to the meaning of quality and quality practice; the establishment of standards and practice; and the measurement for performance and the likely benefits and costs to the client.

Whilst "the passenger approach" emphasises the use of performance indicators and quality circles with a notion of continuous improvement in performance, the "driver approach" understands the notion of quality in terms of worthiness or goodness. This approach emphasises values including
the articulation of worthiness. That is, the values which providers and/or students bring to the counselling context.

In establishing standards of practice and measuring performance, the "passenger approach" might emphasise the use of client feedback and rating scales. The "driver approach" would rely instead on dimensions rather than categories which might be derived from phenomenographic or other qualitative interviews. The practitioner would then critically reflect upon these notions to establish standards of practice consonant with personal and organisational values.

Arguably, the benefits of the "passenger approach" is that it meets our preconceptions associated with quality and quality management. As such the approach meets the needs of administrators and may well have some benefits in attracting financial support in the development of services. The methodologies are relatively simple and the data provided might well be useful for formal submissions.

Some of the costs associated with this approach is that quantitative measures are often implemented for symbolic purposes within the student counselling context. Students are seen as consumers and there is an emphasis upon "pleasing the consumer". The "driver approach" can be more complex but will often result in a statement of principles which may be generalised across areas of service. The benefit to students is that this approach lends itself to the provision of a responsive service which would enable students to reach their potential or meet standards of excellence.

In keeping with the ethos outlined above, we undertook a phenomenographic study in which we interviewed both providers and clients of our service (see Appendix 1). Rather than talking about quality, we spoke about goodness and asked both the providers and the consumers to outline experiences which they have had in providing or utilising a student support service and then, more importantly, asking them to evaluate the goodness of the service provided and also how they arrived at a judgement. Transcripts of the resulting conversation would enable us to understand the conceptions of goodness held by providers and clients of our services.

Two qualitatively different conceptions of goodness provided by providers were as follows:

1. 'Goodness' of the support service is seen as the service's ability to ensure client's satisfaction with received assistance.

The notion of 'goodness' is seen as a subjective judgment regarding the degree of satisfaction expressed by clients:

"It has something to do with the person's expectations of what they are going to get. And I suppose of their expectations are fulfilled, then from their point of view, I guess it is an effective service" (1).

A good quality service is one that meets the needs of the population it serves:

"(service) that can respond to the needs of the student population... one where people would be willing to come... feel confident about coming there to receive assistance..." (1)

(service that) is listening to what the needs of the customers are... and where appropriate, attempting to adopt to those." (2)

The signs of meeting these needs are: students follow advice given and encourage others to use the service:

"...she saw us as being a service that had knowledge and could talk authoritatively on that issue so she valued our opinion..."(1)

"(clients come) because basically they have spoken with others who have been to the service before, they have heard about the assistance and what they might be able to get..."(2)

A good counsellor has in-depth knowledge, good communication skills and a comprehensive range of strategies, uses them to gain and maintain client's trust which in turn makes his or her intervention more effective:
"the ability to be able to listen very closely, both in verbal and non-verbal terms, to your client and to make some sort of connection with them in that respect, so that the client gets the feeling that they are being listened to... I guess it's about being able to build a relationship with your client and I think that's probably got something to do with being more effective than if you don't..."  (1)

2. 'Goodness' of the support service is perceived as a result of the professionalism of the staff

According to this conception, the quality of service is seen to be guaranteed by high professional qualifications of its staff, qualifications which are continuously up-graded through staff development activities. An effective counsellor has a range of options and helps students become independent. To be effective, equally important are such personal characteristics of staff as the ability to show empathy with students, establish good working relationships with them and make them feel comfortable. Adequate resources contribute also to its success.

Conception of goodness provided by consumers was as follows:

3. Goodness of the support service is seen as its ability to facilitate change in client's behaviour and/or help them develop new approaches

In this conception, the goodness or effectiveness of the support service is perceived as a change, an improvement in one's ability to perform one's tasks and/or manage one's life, through changing attitudes, developing new ways of seeing things, or acquiring new skills. Professional qualifications, expertise and good communication skills contribute to the goodness of the service but the value system underlying the provision of services is regarded as much more important. A good and effective counselling service is humanistic in its approach. The ability of the service to meet its aims should be a criterion used to judge its quality.

From our initial interviews, it has emerged that consumers of support service conceive goodness in different ways to the ways considered important by providers. We believe this is important if we are to develop processes which are responsive to the meaning and values regarded as important by the people who utilize student support services.

In conclusion we wish to argue for a radical shift in our concept of quality and a plea to return to the providers and more importantly to the people who use our service and ask them the fundamental question as to their conceptions of the purpose of a student support service and to articulate the nature of goodness in the provision of services. This differs from just asking them in quantitative terms how satisfied they were with the services delivered. Just as importantly we have an obligation to critically reflect upon and to question whether the resulting conceptions related to the notion of goodness in the provision of a service. The results may serve as a precondition to developing ways of enhancing the actual service where this appears appropriate. Alternatively, as Sullivan (previously quoted) points out, the "mission statements, catchphrases and superficial quality assessments" will be very clean, while "the institutions will indeed be very filthy". We need to make sure that our actions match the rhetoric.

Appendix 1

Semi structured interview for research project

Conceptions of goodness in student support services

1. I would like you to think of an incident where you have provided/utilised effective counselling. I would like to start by asking you to describe the incident.

What were the components of the contact which contributed towards the effectiveness of the contact?

More generally, what makes for an effective counsellor?

- Descriptive
- Evaluative

2. Now I would like you to look at a counselling service rather than the individual counsellor.

What are the attributes of an effective service?
How might an effective service be different to a service which is not effective?

- Descriptive
- Evaluative

3. Lastly, if you were to evaluate a service, how might you do this?

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References


