



Roads to quality street: perspectives on quality in ELT

George Pickering explores some of the ways that quality can be assessed in ELT. This article is based upon talks given at a RELSA seminar in Ireland and a LAURELS Conference in Brazil.

If all the vehicles on the road to quality street were laid end to end there would be a traffic jam. Why is there so much emphasis on quality within education and other industries today?

1. Rising customer requirements

Quality initiatives are ways of raising standards in line with the demands of increasingly sophisticated customers. In the past it was possible to offer basic products to customers, who with little or no choice, were more or less obliged to accept what was on offer. As Henry Ford put it, "You can have any colour you like as long as it's black." Now more demanding customers expect greater individualisation and they know that they can go down the road to get it in many cases.

Increasing competition

Increasing global and local competition requires us to seek the differences that make the difference to our customers.

3. The pursuit of excellence

Many educational institutions have been pursuing academic excellence for a long time. To some extent quality is simply another word for something that the best establishments have always been concerned about, a case of old wine in a new bottle.

4. Keeping down costs

Customers want excellent products at inexpensive prices. It is easy to achieve quality if you ignore cost, and it is easy

to achieve low costs if you forget about quality. The key to success today is to provide high quality products and services at a reasonable cost.

History of a word

The word quality has undergone a shift of meaning away from product-based definitions towards customer-based ones.

Product-based

Luxury/Excellence
Conformance to Specification

User-Based

Fitness for Purpose
Meeting customer requirements

Many ELT organisations have taken on board the need to meet the requirements of their customers and have mechanisms in place for finding out their level of satisfaction. However, this does not discount the need to act on occasions in the interests of the customer, even if the customer disagrees, for example, for legal, ethical or professional reasons.

Which customers do we need to satisfy? From a stakeholder perspective customers would include students, parents or sponsors, staff, suppliers, local community, ELT community, global community. Asking the question, "How does this

satisfy our customers?" is a good way of ensuring that quality means and ends do not become confused.

Total Quality Management

West-Burnham (1992) states that, "There is not a single, homogeneous theory of TQM. The gurus have produced sets of precepts which are broadly in accord but differ in significant respects. Most importantly TQM has to evolve in response to the needs, context and values of a specific organisation". What is however fundamental to all TQM approaches is the centrality of the customer. According to West-Burnham the fundamental principles of TQM include:

- 1 The definition of quality is that of the customer, not the supplier.
- 2 Customers are defined as anyone who receives a product or service, i.e. that are internal and external to the organisation and not just the 'person who pays'.
- 3 Quality consists in meeting stated needs, requirements and standards.
- 4 Quality is achieved by the prevention of work that does not meet standards; not by the detection of failure but by continuously improving the service or product.

As the customer is not external to the

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organisation there is a chain of customers all linked together by specific processes. Quality organisations are obsessed with listening to their customers and acting on their replies. "TQM companies are obsessive about customer care and satisfaction as because they have established a correlation between customer satisfaction, reducing costs and enhancing profitability". West-Burnham (1992: 50)

TQM approaches stress the importance of all staff becoming involved in quality initiatives. They also emphasise that quality is a journey and not a destination. Quality obsessed companies seek to improve continuously all of their key services.

Roads to Quality Street

There are many roads that lead to Quality Street and what follows below is a list of only some of the options available.

1. Self Assessment

Several articles on this approach have appeared in previous issues of this Newsletter. See Hebden (1997) and Maxwell-Hyslop (1999) in this Newsletter. Some schools carry out internal audits of their own services and products, which can take the form verifying the extent to which they meet their own service standards. One advantage of this approach is that it involves staff in the process rather than leaving quality in the hands of the experts.

2. Inspection Schemes

These can include pre-inspection visits, inspections and inspection reports. Quality assurance schemes can help to establish standards of excellence at the industry level. The British Council's Accreditation in Britain Scheme covers 350 private and state sector providers of ELT courses in the UK. Schools are inspected every three years in the following seven areas: general management, academic management, academic staff profile, premises, academic resources, learning and

teaching and welfare. Inspection reports include recommendations for improvement.

EQUALS (The European Association for Quality Language Services) operates a European wide quality assurance scheme. This has many similarities with the British Council scheme, but derives its inspection criteria from the association's Code of Practice, which includes Staff, Student and Information Charters.

Inspection schemes have the advantage of offering an expert, external viewpoint of a school's operations.

Disadvantages of inspection schemes include:

- the findings are not automatically owned by staff
- evaluative expertise stays outside the organisation
- quality initiatives can remain externally driven rather than becoming internally driven
- there is sometimes a trade off or tension between ensuring that minimum standards are maintained and helping schools to improve their quality standards
- they can become cumbersome and too dependent on documentation.

In order to overcome some of these disadvantages, some inspection schemes are paying increasing attention to the importance of self-assessment in inspection. Self-assessment forms part of the inspections of Further Education Colleges in the UK and will become an important aspect of inspections in Ireland in the future. In this way organisations are still judged against external criteria but are also encouraged to carry out their own internal quality initiatives and audits.

Benchmarking is one of the most under-utilised quality tools in ELT

3. ISO 9002

ISO 9000 is a series of quality standards, which requires a documented management system in the form of a Quality Manual. The Quality Manual includes policies, procedures and detailed work instructions. The three basic steps to achieving ISO 9000 certification are:

- say what you do - write down your policies and procedures
- do what you say - follow the procedures
- prove that you do it - show proof to internal and external assessors that you do follow the procedures.

(See McEwan (1995) and Kelsall (1995) for articles on this subject in previous Newsletters).

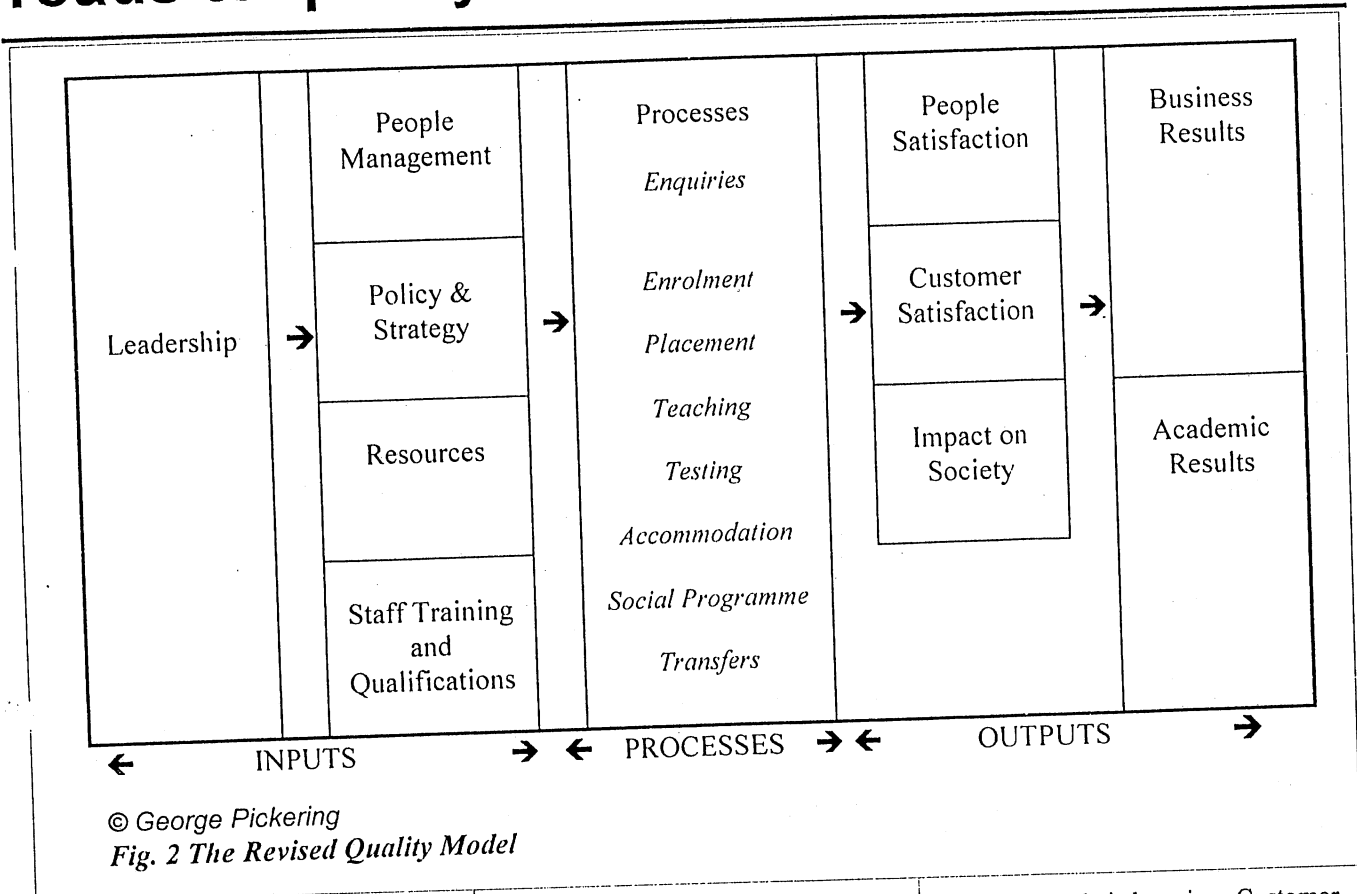
4. Benchmarking

The purpose of benchmarking is to find out how others achieve excellence and to emulate them. This is done by:

- establishing what makes the difference to the customer between an ordinary and an excellent supplier
- setting standards according to the best practice that you can find
- finding out how the best companies meet those standards
- meeting and exceeding those standards

Although some ELT organisations carry out comparative competitor analyses, they do not always go on to find out systematically not only what their competitors are doing but also **how** they achieve their results. Benchmarking is one of the most under-utilised quality tools in ELT. However, one example of this approach can be found within the British Council, whose Direct Teaching Operations can receive Points of Excellence as a consequence of Code of Practice Visits (perhaps revealingly referred to as Cop visits!). The documentation for these Points of Excellence is stored on a Quality Archive and centres can be contacted direct, so others can find out how these high standards have been achieved.

roads to quality street



How the organisation manages resources effectively and efficiently.

- **Processes**

How the organisation identifies, manages, reviews and improves its processes.

- **People Satisfaction**

What the organisation is achieving in relation to the satisfaction of its people.

- **Customer Satisfaction**

What the organisation is achieving in relation to the satisfaction of its external customers.

- **Impact on Society**

What the organisation is achieving in satisfying the needs and the expectations of the community at large.

- **Business Results**

What the organisation is achieving in relation to its planned objectives and in satisfying the needs and expectations of everyone with an interest or stake in the organisation.

My own revised model above includes some of the key processes that an ELT institution in the UK might deliver. It includes separate criteria for Staff Training and Qualifications and Academic Results. Nic Underhill (1995) wrote that we need to focus on

how effectively we monitor the language attainment of our customers. "Very few schools consistently collect truly comparable 'before' and 'after' test data, including an objective assessment of oral/aural skills, if that is what their courses promise, to reassure themselves, not to mention their students, that they are actually competent in their central activity."

Chomsky once observed that no methodology was so bad that it prevented people from learning a language. There is a difference between improving the linguistic proficiency of customers and

Chomsky once observed that no methodology was so bad that it prevented people from learning a foreign language

maximising their learning. Customer satisfaction should not be the only measure of performance. No matter how difficult it may be to do in practice, it is important to obtain measures of the "added value" to clients of their courses.

The advantages of the EFQM model include the following:

- it is based on self-assessment
- it acknowledges the importance of improving processes in order to increase customer value
- it is outcome focused
- it can facilitate benchmarking activities
- it can be applied to educational institutions

The British Quality Foundation have brought out a special interpretation of the business excellence model for education.

Questions

What are your organisation's key processes?

How easily could the EFQM model be applied to your institution?

What process is to be improved?	placement? teaching? accommodation? social programme? social impact?
How is quality to be evaluated?	service standard? performance indicator? customer rating?
What kinds of standards?	normal practice? best practice? aspirational standards?
How is it to be monitored?	audit? inspection? observation? focus group? survey?
Who monitors?	management? staff? customers? inspectors? government official?
At each stage the question can be asked who decides the answers to the questions above?	customers? management? staff? inspectors? peer reviewers? government official?

Quality Issues

Before carrying out any quality initiatives the questions above might usefully be considered.

Conclusion

The provision of quality products and services has become an essential rather than a desirable attribute of ELT organisations. The precise route and means of achieving ever increasing levels of customer satisfaction will depend on the maturity, market position, location and culture of a particular institution. I have found it useful to compare the development of quality initiatives to the apprenticeship of a master craftsman. They learn their craft by watching and listening to experts and acting upon their advice and guidance. They also become aware of changing styles and fashions and the needs of customers as they carry out various commissions. Having internalised these standards, they work within them to set even higher personal levels of excellence. At the end of the day the pursuit of excellence cannot be externally imposed upon the unwilling. If there is no desire within there will ultimately be no satisfaction without.

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