

Quality Enhancement in Adult and Higher Education

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Abstract

The concept of quality is an important feature of life in present-day society. We are all clients and customers of goods and services and desire to obtain the best possible “bargain” for the money and time we invest in obtaining them.

The popularity of quality as a management buzzword in recent years has led to being applied in many areas outside business, including education. However, the term remains problematic because of its inherent vagueness. A review of recent definitions of quality in management texts finds emphasis in its use there on consistency of product and service to client and conformity requirements.

This has led the development of industrial approaches to “quality management”, designed to produce products and services of good quality, and guarantee this to the consumer. In turn, this has stimulated the development of methods of assessing and evaluating whether the promised quality is in fact being delivered.

These concern affect the educational sphere as well. The debate about quality in adult and higher education ranges from agreement and disagreement to complete confusion.

Quality enhancement and management refer to all activities, processes and structures by means of which something is performed, e.g. a service. Their task is to ensure the quality of the activities by ensuring the quality of the outcome.

Therefore, the aim of the article is to present methods of quality enhancement and control and explore the use of the instruments.

Key Words: Quality Enhancement; Workshop.

In recent years adult education and development have been facing new challenges, which should also be seen as opportunities. The situation and evolution of adult education prove very complex. Adult education suffers from a huge need of modernization. One worldwide trend that can be observed is that the more developed a society, the greater the need for general and vocational, political and cultural adult education, and the larger the number of people actually taking part. This means that structural support for sponsoring bodies, skills development and quality assurance must be given greater attention if sustainable progress is to be made in relation to both institutions and activities and is to outline particular projects.

Quality is at the top of most agendas and improving quality is probably the most important task facing any institution. However, despite its importance, many people find quality an enigmatic concept. It is very difficult to define and measure quality. One person’s idea of quality often conflicts with another and, there is never a final definition.

We all know quality when we experience it, but describing and explaining is a more difficult task. Quality is what makes the difference between things being excellent or bad. Quality also makes the difference between success and failure.

Seeking the source of quality is an important issue in education. Education is recognizing the need to pursue it, and to deliver it to students. There are a lot of candidates for the source of quality in education:

- ! Outstanding teachers
- ! Excellent examination results
- ! High moral issues
- ! The support of business or local community
- ! Plentiful resources
- ! The application of the latest technology

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- ! Strong and purposeful leadership
- ! The care and concern for students
- ! A well-balanced and challenging curriculum

When I first started researching quality, I asked the question “why should an educational establishment want to be involved in quality enhancement/assurance activities?” My research has led me to the conclusion that this is linked with professional responsibility or results from competition in the educational market place, or from the need to demonstrate accountability.

The concepts of quality control, assurance and enhancement originated in educational contexts initially during the Second World War where reliable production of armaments and aeroplanes was a major concern.

Ways of reducing the number of defects were developed through a systematic study of design, of production processes and of quality control. The techniques were developed further in the post-war renaissance of Japanese industry and have now spread to generalized use in industry and have been extended to service industries, where the concept of satisfaction with services provided is introduced.

In manufacturing industries, QA is achieved technically by such processes as

- a) through analysis of function
- b) careful design of components
- c) working to engage standards and measurements
- d) standardization of the process of production
- e) checking the finished product
- f) seeking, listening to and acting on customer feedback

Humanly, QA is enhanced by means of

- a) informing all members of the team of the common aims and objectives
- b) ensuring that all members of the team are working to common standards
- c) encouragement of small teams where considerable scope is given to self-organization and individual initiative is welcomed
- d) flexibility of work
- e) team responsibility for their own quality control, i.e. from within

The idea of meeting or exceeding the customer’s expectations is central to the development of quality assurance in service industries. It assumes that customers choose providers on the basis of how far their needs are met. In the adult education sector, many learners are financed by their employer and there can be conflict between satisfying the needs of the individual with the specific requirements of the one who is paying.

An essential feature of quality assurance is setting and checking of standards. In order to be able to do this, a common language is required. Besides, serious quality initiatives at local, national and international levels are necessary.

Quality enhancement in adult and higher education is a deliberate process of change that leads to improvement. Enhancement of something is fundamentally about trying to make the world a better place and succeeding in this enterprise. Teachers and high educational institutions voluntarily engage in quality enhancement both in order to improve students’ learning and their experiences of high education, and to respond to the ever changing needs and interests of society.

Voluntary participation in quality enhancement is driven by the same values that drive personal learning and facilitate the learning of theirs. It involves everyone who teaches, supports and guides students and managers and administrators of high educational institutions. It includes significant strategic initiatives and the many small things that people do to try to make things better.

Since we are concerned with adult education, all programs for them should comply with certain principles of adult learning, which are:

- ! **Voluntary participation:** adults learn better in situations where they themselves choose to get involved
- ! **Mutual respect:** for adults to progress in their learning, they need to feel that they are valued and respected
- ! **Collaboration:** adults learn best in situations where they can share and learn from other adults
- ! **Action and reflection:** to be effective, professional development opportunities have to be rooted in practices, which gives adults the chance to reflect on what they do and then modify their actions, if they deem it necessary
- ! **Organizational setting:** professional development programs need the support of the institution with a commitment to helping develop and sustain programs for teachers
- ! **Choice and change:** adults learn best when given the chance to make their own choices and to change them if they are not successful
- ! **Motivation:** adults engage in learning when they see that a specific learning opportunity can help them cope better with their everyday lives
- ! **Self-direction:** when teachers are given a chance to actively participate in the planning and implementation of programs, the results can be impressive

When speaking about quality control and enhancement, we need to differentiate between public and private sector quality control. Private sector control is voluntary, connected to marketing and client-related, influenced by commercial considerations. It tends to be often compulsory carried out by government inspectors, defined by law, influenced by authorities, perceived as threatening since jobs and careers depend on the results, and, therefore, difficult to implement. There is increasing emphasis in national educational systems on using the principles of quality assurance to replace bureaucratic systems and institutions are given the freedom and responsibility of defining their own educational mission and their own standards.

The steps of quality initiative whether in a state or private educational establishment, would include the following elements:

Defining the mission: What's the role of the institution? What are the ambitions?

Setting the aim: What does it seek to achieve in the short to medium term?

Producing the promise: What promise or guarantees will it give to its users?

Assessing what we do: Observations to get a realistic view of present practice

Measuring the gaps between promise and practice: Identifying the areas where improvisation is needed

Deciding on measures of improvement: Making specific action plans for doing this

Quality enhancement and quality management refer to all activities, processes and structures by means of which something is performed including e. g. a service. Their task is to ensure the quality of the activities by ensuring the quality of the outcome.

In adult and higher education it is helpful to see quality management and enhancement as a "service". Following three considerations are very important:

1. The qualitative dimension of service:

- ! the potential available (equipment, personnel, activities, processes)
- ! the actual provision (the result of the potentially available activities and processes, e.g. individual courses, the half-yearly programmed, the prospectus)
- ! Implementation
- ! The yield (i.e. any impression, knowledge or skills that result)

2. The concept of "customer"

In services, the essential reason for seeking quality enhancement and quality management is to meet customers' expectations and provide customer satisfaction. The key focus is on the learner. As ISO norm states, "It should be possible to reconcile customer satisfaction with the professional criteria and professional ethic of the service organization". (ISO. 9004-2/63 Note 17)

3. The concept of "product"

Product is understood to mean the result of activities or processes. In adult and higher education, this definition can easily be applied to a single course or set of courses.

Thus, in the light of these three points, the importance of a process orientation in services and in education is clear. It assumes that a high quality process is crucial to the achievement of a high-quality outcome. In other words, the quality of the process has a beneficial effect on the yield, the cognitive, personal and social skills which learners may acquire or develop.

Quality enhancement requires the so-called quality management system. This relates to all the activities, processes and structures which contribute to the outcome. The system implies drafting of a plan of events with specific stages of work, in addition to the overall plan of the work, feedback and quality targets. In the case of my work, this so-called quality plan is spread over the year. It includes particular types of conference involving students and outside guests, so that space is given to needs and interests both in the field of action and in the university course, and that these influence development. In adult educational establishments there is a wide variety of possibilities, such as an "ideas exchange" with participants.

A quality management system can only be set up effectively if all those concerned with the work are involved. This applies to universities as well as to adult educational establishments. This must be done from the outset. If staff are involved, they can play a part in its design and can take on responsibility for it. Understanding of a common purpose rises markedly so that motivation becomes an inner desire, a wish to be involved rather than an "externally imposed obligation".

Quality management expands people's perspectives and makes them more able to cooperate, e.g. with partner organizations in continuing education or business.

The teaching profession provides us with a useful tradition of seeing adult education as a service, and of quality and quality management, which we should not forget or abandon.

Thus, the most important points can be summarized as follows:

- ! Agreement on the applicability of the terms "product" and "customer" in relation to continuing education provision in setting quality criteria
- ! Quality criteria must match customers' wishes
- ! Quality criteria must be transparent and customers must be able to check them
- ! Standardized criteria to provide a basic guarantee of product quality in continuing education should be complemented by additional criteria specific to each continuing education product

When all is said and done, chocolate has to taste good!

References

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