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**TACKLING THE EDUCATION / PLANNING INTERFACE
THROUGH AN APPROACH TO QUALITY**

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ABSTRACT

Quality is a term that tends to be used by educators and institutional planners in very different ways.

This leads to the danger of there being a dichotomy in institutional thinking about what constitutes quality, and especially about how it should be operationalised. Should the organisation's 'Quality System' be dedicated to the learning experience of students? Or should the system focus on quantitative measures of institutional efficiency?

This paper will argue that such a dichotomy can be handled by tackling the problem where the contending ideas interface and that contemporary ideas about the nature of quality and its assessment can provide the means by which this can be achieved.

The paper will describe local research into thinking about quality and an approach being developed at Swinburne University of Technology that can reduce variation in institutional thinking about what constitutes quality. The paper will be structured so as to cover:

- the Approach to Quality;
- the Deployment of this Approach;
- the Results; and
- the Improvements being made.

Session participants will be asked to reflect and engage on how their own institutions handle quality issues at the learning/planning interface.

TACKLING THE EDUCATION / PLANNING INTERFACE THROUGH AN APPROACH TO QUALITY

OVERVIEW / CONTEXT

Universities are organisations in transition – from the collegial culture of the ‘Groves of Academe’, to the culture of the modern corporation. The 1999 DETYA study, *Academic Work in the 21st Century: changing roles and policies* argues that such transition is a result of changes in financing and accountability and from increasing knowledge and the demand for its synthesis with industrial relations policies and the impact of information technology. An indicator of this transition is the way that the term quality tends to be used by educators and institutional planners in quite different ways.

It is beyond dispute that the term quality has many operational definitions, some even being contradictory (for example, it can be argued that two of the most popular characterisations of the concept of quality stand diametrically opposed – ie. standardisation and conformance, as opposed to ‘fitness-for-purpose’ and innovation).

For educators it is still quite usual to think of quality primarily in terms of ‘the pursuit of academic excellence’ or ‘the adding of value through effective student learning’. Those involved in institutional planning would agree that these are some of the most desired educational outcomes for an educational institution to pursue. But, in their own circles the term ‘quality’ is more likely than not to be used as a form of shorthand for ‘organisational performance’ (as indicated by a range of usually quantitative measures of organisational efficiency and effectiveness). Institutional planners often use the terms ‘quality’ and ‘performance’ quite interchangeably.

But such occupational characterisations may well be stereotypical - my research indicates that in my own organisation at least there is considerable variation in ideas about quality across occupational groups. But on an organisational basis, there is a danger of a dichotomy in institutional thinking about what constitutes quality developing, between educationalists and the administrators. Should the organisation’s ‘Quality System’ be dedicated to the quest for adding value to the student learning experience? Or should the system focus on gathering a whole range of (usually quantitative) measures of institutional efficiency? Unless there is some attempt to address the source of variation in organisational thinking about quality, divergence of this sort is likely to remain unresolved. What is needed in a university environment (especially one in transition), is an overall approach to quality that is inclusive and able to accommodate a variety of different ideas about what people think quality really means.

The pre-conditions for a dichotomy of this type exist at my own institution – what about at yours? There is the academic planning, approvals and reporting system through various boards and committees, and there are the University’s financial planning and performance reporting processes that managers are responsible for, and then there is what is called the ‘Quality System’. Or, I should say in our case, there are quality systems, as Swinburne is an inter-sectoral institution (about 53:47 TAFE to higher education in terms of EFTSU load), and each sector has its own Quality System. The TAFE Division’s quality system is ISO 9000 compliant and the rest of the University uses a continuous quality improvement system called SQMS¹

This paper will describe some research into local thinking about quality at Swinburne and an approach being developed that has the potential to reduce the scope for unhelpful divergence in thinking about quality, even within our slightly unusual “conglomerate” organisational structure.

It will be argued that such a dichotomy can be confronted by tackling the problem where the contending concepts are most likely to directly interface – within the minds of the people who work in the different kinds of organisational units.

THE RESEARCH

To complete the requirements for a Certificate in Quality Management Assessment I undertook some fairly simple research into ideas about quality at my own University. A survey was administered to staff by E-mail to which I received 90 replies - 48% from academic staff (about 60:40 higher education to TAFE teachers), and 49% from administrative staff, the remaining 3% chose not to be identified.

There were two fairly basic questions asked:

1. Preferred definition of Quality, from the following options:

- The achievement of excellence / the pursuit of perfection
- Conformity to specified standards
- Fitness-for-purpose
- Value-added
- Value-for-money.

2. The best way to improve Quality, from the following options:

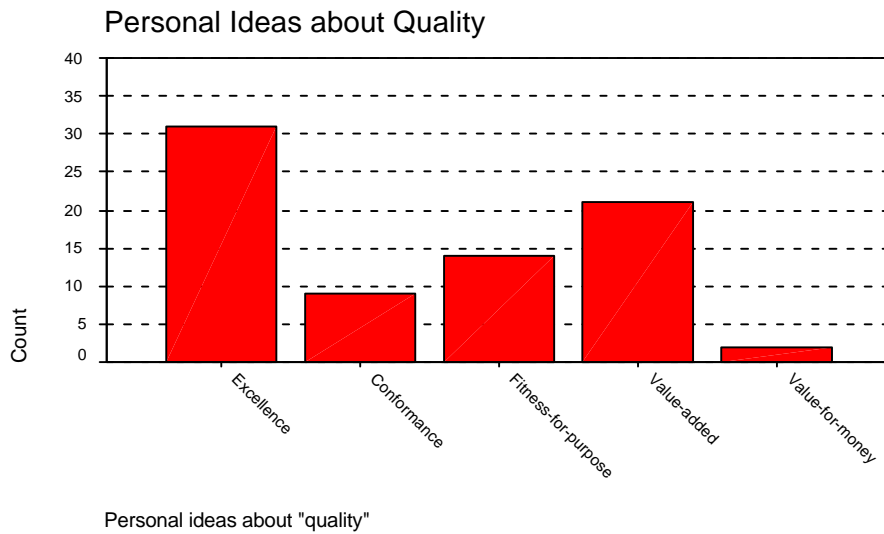
- Everyone get on with improving the quality of their own work
- Every organisational unit develop its own strategy to improve quality at the unit level
- The University to develop a comprehensive quality improvement strategy for all organisational units to use
- Have highly trained 'Quality Experts' from outside the organisation brought in to tell us how we can improve quality
- Other – please describe.

DEFINITIONS OF QUALITY

The most popular definition of Quality was the "pursuit of excellence" (over 30%) followed by Value-added, and Fitness-for-purpose. Together these three accounted for about 80% of responses.

The least popular definition was Value-for-money (about 1%) followed by Conformance to specified standards (about 10%).

Graph I

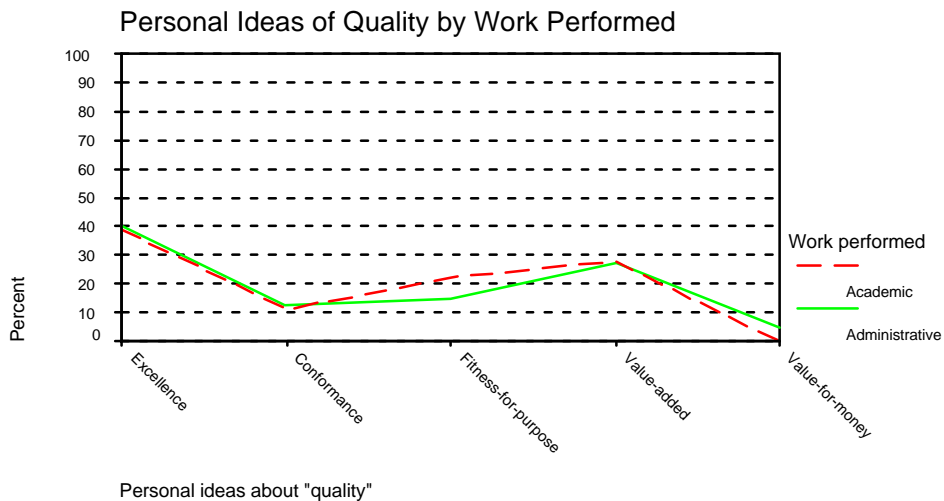


The most interesting result was that the strongest support for Excellence came from the TAFE and Corporate areas of the University (about 50% in each area) with higher education staff much more likely to choose Value-added and fitness-for-purpose, especially higher education academic staff.

Given that all TAFE staff had been involved in ISO 9000 Certification, I had anticipated that Conformance to specified standards would have been a much more common choice, but the only category of staff to show any fondness for this definition were TAFE administrative staff. TAFE teaching staff on the other hand overwhelmingly chose Excellence as their preferred definition of quality.

However, Corporate administrative staff also overwhelmingly preferred Excellence as their definition of quality, yet this was the area of the University most exposed to market-driven expectations that 'quality' is about achieving measurable (usually) financial efficiencies. When aggregated these differences cancel each other out, so overall, as the graph below shows, there appears to be very little to choose between academic and administrative staff ideas about quality, with academic staff being only slightly more attracted to the Fitness-for-purpose definition than administrative staff.

Graph 2



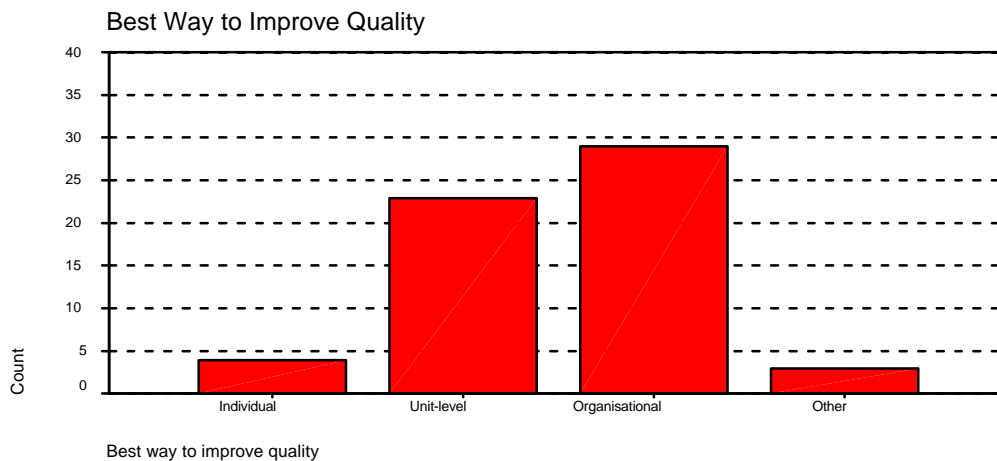
In summary, in this study at least, variation in peoples' working ideas about quality appears to be based more on individual differences rather than the unambiguous influence of consistent institutional, sectoral, or occupational systems of thinking about quality.

These results set me thinking - unless it is given a mandatory operational definition, what is actually going on in peoples' minds when they hear the word quality? And, what then should that institutional definition of quality be?

BEST WAY TO IMPROVE QUALITY

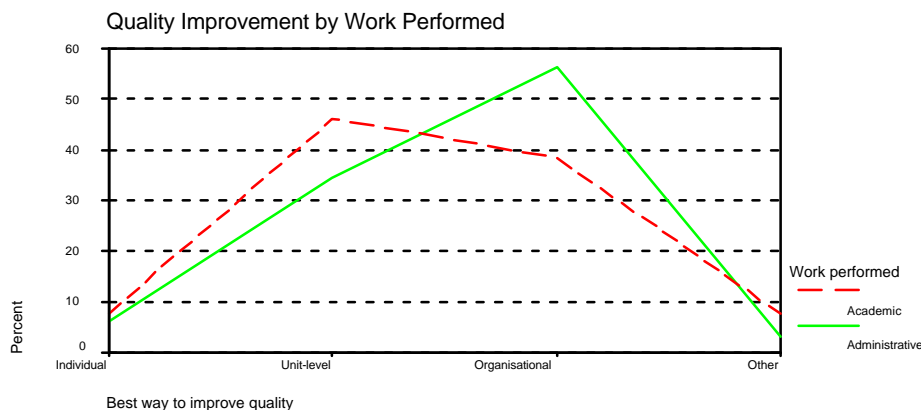
When it came to the ways to improve quality however, the picture changed somewhat, the overwhelming majority of respondents choosing organisation-wide or unit-level based strategies over individual approaches.

Graph 3



In contrast to ideas about quality, overall there was also greater variation across staffing categories, with academic staff having only a slight preference for unit-level based improvement strategies, but administrative staff having a much stronger preference for a University-wide approach. Interestingly, no one chose the External quality expert option as the best way to improve quality.

Graph 4



There was also variation across sectoral / occupational categories, with higher education academics being evenly split between unit and organisation-wide approaches, and while higher education administrators and TAFE teachers had a preference for local initiatives, TAFE and Corporate administrators had a very strong preference for an organisation-wide approach.

As a group our people seem to have a clear preference for *collaborative* approaches to quality improvement over individualistic approaches, irrespective of different individual ideas about what constitutes quality. What are we to make of this? I am reminded of the old saying, “I may not know about art, but I know what I like” but with the word quality substituted for art. People from quite distinctive organisational and occupational groups, and exhibiting a range of different ideas about quality, seem to hold that it doesn’t really matter what the actual definition of quality is, so long as we are committed to working together to improve it!

The only indisputable conclusions I find it possible to draw from the survey results therefore are:

- that to enjoy widespread support among staff across the University, the institutional definition of quality must be broadly-based / multi-faceted; and,
- the quality improvement strategy must be designed to work at both the organisational unit-level and organisation-wide – ie it must be simultaneously driven ‘from the top down’ and ‘from the bottom up’ and be implemented in a collaborative manner. This means that it must be a planned approach, and accommodate differences across various unit’s functions & processes, be they educational or administrative in kind.

Modern ideas about quality and its assessment in contemporary Quality Management thinking agree. It is conceived as an holistic concept, based on ethical principles and involving multi-faceted assessment and evaluation processes. Liston (1999) cites the Characteristics of effective quality management as:

- *planning, innovation and strategies to implement change;*
- *use of benchmarks, standards and KPIs for monitoring change;*
- *evaluation of best practice for continuous improvement;*
- *efficiency and cost-effectiveness;*
- *rational management information systems and reporting mechanisms;*
- *dissemination of information and ongoing communication.*

(Liston, 1999 p53)

Quality therefore is much more than the sum total of the teaching and research KPIs or other performance measures of organisational effectiveness or efficiency – it is also the evaluation process that ‘tells the story’ behind what the figures only point towards, such as:

- what (in theory) is being done, the fundamental ideas involved – the Approach;
- how it actually is being done, the practice - Deployment; and
- informed judgements about the quality of the resulting outcomes and / or why and how things should be done differently in future – Results & Improvement.

In a university setting this is a much more satisfactory and appropriate way of viewing quality, embracing as it does elements of systems thinking, leadership, teamwork, risk management, change management and continual improvement. It is also quite consistent with what my research indicates. Like love, in the eye of the beholder, quality can be ‘a many splendid thing’ - but its probably going to be much more enjoyable if you can share it with like-minded individuals!

The rest of this paper will focus on describing:

- the **A**pproach to quality being developed at Swinburne;
- the **D**eployment of this approach in ways that are mindful of the conceptual problems involved;
- the **R**esults achieved by the approach so far; and
- the **I**mprovements being made, including work in progress.

ADRI

Approach

A formal Quality Review Program was adopted at Swinburne as an annual event following the positive finding of the Federal government's 1995 Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education review team that:

“The University has developed an innovative university-wide Swinburne Quality Management System (SQMS) based on the Scottish model of educational quality assurance. The SQMS is an internal system for audit and improvement.....while the system is not yet fully implemented, the team acknowledges the University’s initiative in adapting the Scottish system for its own use....The expansion of the SQMS to the key areas of research, community service and teaching & learning, provides Swinburne with a distinctive approach to quality assurance and to explore the implications of ISO certification for the University.”

(CQAHE Report on 1995 Quality Reviews, Volume 2 pp 225-9)

Since 1995 the SQMS has changed from an audit-driven approach, to one based on the continuous improvement of key processes through self-assessment, followed by the validation of self-assessment outcomes. The system now incorporates the same ADRI (Approach, Deployment, Results & Improvement) self-assessment methodology used in the Australian Quality Awards (AQA) for Business Excellence program.

With the exception of the TAFE Division (and more recently, Facilities and Services), the University has not taken up the option to further explore the implications of ISO certification for Swinburne. There appears to be broad support for the concept of continuous quality improvement across all sections of the University.

There is now a University-wide framework of different quality programs and systems:

- SQMS Self-Assessments and Validation Reviews (Higher Ed. & Corporate);
- ISO 9000 certification (TAFE Division and Thailand Campus);
- the Australian Quality Awards for Business Excellence program and Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE) Quality Framework; and
- Other.

1. SQMS

SQMS is a fully internal system – it consists of a set of good practice standards for continuous improvement of 15 Key Processes:

1. Guidance & Support – guidance & support processes meet learners’ needs
2. Program Design – program content & learning outcomes are fit for purpose
3. Program Delivery – teaching & learning systems meet learners’ needs
4. Assessment of Attainment – assessment of student learning outcomes is effective
5. Research – high standard research activity

6. Strategic Management – clear institutional purpose & direction
7. Financial Management – institutional financial soundness & efficiency
8. Marketing – effective planning & promotion of educational programs & services
9. Human Resource Management – effective management of staffing requirements
10. Human Resource Management – effective management of staff development needs
11. Equity – effective management of institutional fairness
12. Health & Safety – effective protection of individual well-being and group safety
13. Premises, Equipment & Resources – the maintenance of a proper learning environment
14. Communication & Administration – effective management systems are in place
15. Quality Management – the Quality System is subject to review and improvement

and the **Swinburne Quality Review Program (SQRP)**. The SQRP consists of:

1.1 Unit-based Self-Assessment

All higher education and corporate organisational units undertake an assessment of at least one selected key process in the first half of each year. Educational units tend to focus on the educational processes and corporate services on the management processes, though the academic units are free to select a management process if it suits their purpose. All units use the same ADRI assessment methodology, irrespective of the type of process being assessed.

1.2 Validation Review

In the second half of the year the outcomes of unit-based Self-Assessments are subject to a process of validation by:

- Quality Validation Review – a visit by a 2nd party review team (ie. consisting of staff who are external to the unit being visited); and/or
- Internal Benchmarking – (subject to pilot in Semester II 1999).

This system incorporates a number of the characteristics of good practice identified in a recent study of quality evaluation and self-evaluation in 31 European universities, Dubois (1968):

“because each university is at the same time a public institution, a set of professional bodies, a business for knowledge production and diffusion, and because each institution has a specific history, the best evaluation model for improving university performance is pluralist (participative and contradictory), context-sensitive (taking into account the university environment), dynamic (taking into account university objectives and history), integral (making links between all university activities and dimensions), and regularly repeated.”

(Dubois 1968, p14)

2. ISO 9000 certification

Certification to any of the ISO 9000 series of standards is an internationally recognised approach to quality assurance. The TAFE Division Quality System has been specifically designed with the needs and requirements of ISO 9001 certification in mind. It is based on management review, document control, internal audit for corrective and preventative action, and on external audit for ensuring compliance to the ISO standard. It is this last feature which primarily distinguishes it from SQMS. The new ISO 9000:2000 standard will be in place next year. It adopts more of a process management approach, which will make ISO certification more compatible with the SQMS and AQA approaches.

With the exception of a couple of corporate units, the remainder of the University has not pursued ISO certification as an approach to quality. Liston (1999) cites:

"A review of the literature and the outcomes from the global and Australian surveys suggests that currently there is little evidence of commitment to use ISO 9000 standards for education in the higher education sector. Somewhat more interest is apparent in the vocational education and training sector."

(Liston, 1999, Op cit. P139)

ISO certification however will be a requirement for the University's Laem Chabang campus in Thailand to meet some local operational requirements.

Currently Facilities and Services have contracted to undergo a non-certification audit to ISO 9000:2000, in order to prepare their systems and processes for future certification, and Information Technology Services has shown some interest in ISO, but no academic unit has yet put up their hand.

3. Australian Quality Awards for Business Excellence program

This is a national best practice program run by the Australian Quality Council (AQC) based on organisational self-assessment. It uses the same ADRI self-assessment methodology as SQMS and the quality program developed by OTFE for the Victorian State Training System.

The AQC Business Excellence framework consists of an integrated set of categories and criteria:

- Leadership & innovation;
- Strategy & planning processes;
- Data, information and knowledge;
- People;
- Customer & market focus;
- Processes, products & services;
- Business results.

To date, no part of the University has submitted an entry for the AQA Business Excellence program. The TAFE Division's well-developed approach to formal Quality Management and the similar nature of OTFE's TAFE Institute Self-Assessment Model would support an AQA excellence bid.

4. Other

There are a number of other organisational quality initiatives running concurrently:

- Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service Benchmarking Project;
- Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee's Benchmarking in Universities Pilot;
- Other local benchmarking initiatives;
- Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs / OTFE Quality Programs
- 'Systems 21' reviews (ie. breakthrough technology systems for the C21st); and
- Ad-hoc or special purpose reviews.

These initiatives tend to be run independently and are not generally integrated with the University's formal Quality Program.

DEPLOYMENT

Implementation of the approach is primarily by the formation of self-assessment and internal audit teams at the level of the organisational unit. This is because the organisational unit is the natural work unit, where interaction takes place with “customers”, be they learners or other stakeholders. As can be expected in any large and complex organisation, self-assessment is performed with varying degrees of commitment, effort and resource by different units, but there is an on-going validation process to ensure that self-assessments are yielding useful results.

A best practice approach would probably also involve the formation of organisation-wide, cross-functional process improvement teams, consisting of the staff actually involved in the processes being reviewed, and including representation of both customers and suppliers in the process (see under Improvements below for further details).

Within the University-wide policy framework, different organisational management, coordination and support arrangements are devolved across parts of the University:

- University-wide – the Quality Policy framework approved by the Vice-Chancellor / Deputy Vice Chancellor and coordinated and supported by the Office for QEd;
- Divisional level – Divisional DVCs are responsible for their own Quality Systems and programs, coordinated and supported by divisional Quality Coordinators, and integrated into the university-wide framework by the Office for QEd;
- Organisational unit level – each Head of unit is responsible for system implementation, supported by his/her unit-based “Quality Facilitator(s)”.

The Quality initiatives of the different Divisions can be counted as equivalent, ie:

- SQMS & OTFE Self-Assessments;
- ISO 9000 audits and Quality Validation Reviews / Internal Benchmarking.

Recently the Quality Program was more closely integrated with the University’s other business planning and performance reporting processes. An Information Management Group has been established containing three separate organisational units that cooperate closely and report to the same member of the University’s senior management team:

- The Foresight and Planning Unit – it looks after the University’s macro planning and reporting processes;
- The Information and Statistics Office – it provides the data and information necessary for management decision making processes; and
- The Office for Quality Education focuses on quality review, assessment and evaluation.

The organisational linking of these three units has created the platform for closer integration of the institutional planning and performance reporting processes, and the educational quality program. In addition to undertaking evaluations of teaching and learning and customer satisfaction surveys, the

Office for Quality Education also offers a suite of three integrated quality improvement programs:

- The *Education Quality Improvement Projects* (EQuIP) program - to add further value to the programs and services provided by the University;
- The *Swinburne Excellence Awards* program - to recognise and reward excellence in teaching, research and the provision of service; and
- *SQMS* - to provide the means for units to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement, and to plan for improvement.

The triangulation of the three specialist units within the Information Management Group, and within QEd, the triangulation of these three quality programs, provides opportunities for *continuous organisational learning* about how we manage our business. SQMS also 'operationalises' quality by focusing on the need for systematic improvement in all Key Processes – irrespective of whether these are the core educational processes, supporting management, financial or administrative processes, or even those referred to as 'quality processes'. The problem of variation across different processes is tackled by consistently using the same systematic process improvement methodology across all of the University's Key Processes – ADRI.

RESULTS

The outcomes of the Quality Program are process improvements leading to greater institutional effectiveness and efficiency - these are reported in the following ways:

- by organisational units, through meeting their quality and performance reporting requirements;
- by the Divisions / Corporate – internally, to the Chancellery and JPRC via the University's annual performance reporting system and externally, through the annual DETYA Quality Assurance and Improvement Plan and its equivalent in TAFE. In the case of ISO 9000 certification, the external reporting is also to the certifying authority.

This year the University reported the results listed below to DETYA based on the 1998 SQMS Quality Program (and where they are available, the emerging 1999 figures are included in brackets).

Self-Assessment (all units):

Areas of Strength identified by units – 116 (136)

Opportunities for Improvement identified by – 79 (126)

Actions planned by units to address opportunities - 68

Validation Review (four units):

Good practices – 10

Corrective & Preventative actions – 20.

In the TAFE Division a new Quality System has now been developed to prepare the greatly expanded Division for certification to ISO 9001:2000.² This system will be available to other parts of the organisation that wish to pursue ISO certification, such as the Laem Chabang campus in Thailand.

IMPROVEMENT

To improve on the current approach, I believe it is now necessary for us to:

- have a clearer understanding of, and stronger commitment to the University's formal Quality Program;
- adopt a best practice approach to process improvement on an organisation-wide basis; and
- achieve even better integration of the Quality Program with other systems.

Improved understanding of a University-wide Quality framework primarily concerns staff at a high level in the organisation, as the actual deployment of the different quality initiatives takes place at the divisional and/or organisational unit level. Strong commitment from staff at the operational level can only be reasonably expected where there is strong leadership.

To improve the implementation of the current approach, I believe it is now necessary to move to a best-practice process management methodology in our Quality Program, as this is consistent with the quality principles that under-pin SQMS, ISO 9000:2000, and the AQA program.

One way in which this could be achieved would be to ensure that the key process owners regularly review the key process(es) for which they are responsible, on either a divisional or a university-wide basis, rather than just focus on their own unit.

This could be tackled through the SQRP. For example:

- Human Resources (say) could set up a University-wide Self-Assessment team, consisting of members of HR staff and appropriate staff drawn from each of the operating Divisions, to review (say) Key Process #9 - Staffing on a university-wide basis;
- or
- a University-wide Validation Review team could be assembled by the Quality Unit in order to validate the results of all unit-based Self-Assessments of Key Process #9 that have already been performed.

Either of these approaches would broaden the impact of the review from that of an organisational unit base, to an organisation-wide base. These process reviews could if required then be counted towards ISO 9000 management reviews, and/or an AQA for Business Excellence organisational self-assessments. This sort of process-based approach was explored in two Validation through Internal Benchmarking pilots this year with very positive results being reported by the participating units.

To improve the results being achieved by the current approach, better integration with the University's resource allocation, staff recognition & reward processes, and with other quality initiatives must also be achieved.

The Office for Quality Education already coordinates the Swinburne Excellence Awards program to provide some forms of recognition to staff, and has introduced the Education Quality Improvement Program (EQIP) to allocate resources to selected quality improvement initiatives. However further work is still required to more closely integrate the University's Quality Program with the planning, resource allocation, performance reporting, staff promotion and recognition systems.

Currently - CHEMS benchmarking is only reported to the staff directly involved (and to CHEMS) but not integrated with the SQMS or ISO system; AV-VC Benchmarking is only a pilot at this stage; the DETYA Quality Assurance and Improvement Plan is reported to Canberra, but not used within the organisation; and it is currently unclear to what purpose OTFE intends putting the TAFE Institute Self-Assessment Model – for organisational self-improvement or for accountability reporting? In addition, though ad-hoc reviews often have a special purpose, they also duplicate or defray the institutional effort going into the routine Quality Review program.

All these various initiatives involve different dimensions of the multi-faceted concept of 'Total Quality' and ideally should be linked with the University's formal Quality Program to form a fully

integrated education and planning interface. This would result in closer alignment of the University's core business (education) and the other business planning and performance reporting processes.

Together, the improvements noted above would result in a model Quality Program along the following lines.

- (i) For "small-step" continuous quality improvement, each operating division uses the most appropriate approach for its particular needs. This may be annual unit-based SQMS Self-Assessments or the ISO 9001 Quality System, as appropriate;

- (ii) For quality assurance, each division continues to subject unit-based self-assessments / internal audits to an appropriate validation process – either SQMS Validation Review (ie. 2nd party internal audit / internal benchmarking) or ISO 9000 certification (ie. an external 3rd party “system compliance” audit), as appropriate.
- (iii) For “big-step” or “breakthrough” improvement, at least once in each three year strategic planning cycle, senior management commission a major divisional or University-wide process review of a selected SQMS Key Process or AQA categories of processes, as appropriate - for example:
 - SQMS KP #1 -5 – Teaching & Learning and Research “Processes, products & services” (AQA category);
 - SQMS KP#6-8 – Strategy & planning processes / Data, information and knowledge (AQA categories);
 - SQMS KP#9-12 – People (AQA category);
 - SQMS KP#13-15 – Resource / Process management (ISO 9000:2000 categories).

Such process-based reviews should include the results of any relevant benchmarking activities undertaken during that particular planning cycle and be planned and reported through the University’s foresight and planning process.

- (iv) At the strategic level, once every fifth or sixth year, undertake a strategic whole-of-organisation quality review, along the lines of an AQA for Business Excellence organisational self-assessment. Such high-level, holistic organisational reviews would need to include the results of all types of quality initiatives, would involve external stakeholders and be planned through the Swinburne foresight and planning process.

I think, and my research suggests, that the most important way of thinking about quality is to conceive of it as a multi-dimensional way of making judgements about the value of what we do, regardless of whether what we do is to educate or administrate. This is doing more than following the popular myth that ‘quality’ is really *only* about collecting and reviewing sets of quantitative performance measures, important as these various indicators of quality may be. Because it characterises quality as a comprehensive process, the ADRI model is not only elegant, it is also organisationally useful because it traverses a number of the popular working definitions of quality that keep on cropping up in the research, for example:

- Approach – ‘Fitness-for-purpose’, adoption of the appropriate plan for the circumstance;
- Deployment – ‘Conformance to specified standards’, to actually do what the plan requires;
- Results – ie. the outcomes achieved in terms of ‘Value-added’ and ‘Value-for-money’; and
- Improvement – the endless ‘pursuit of excellence’.

Within this framework, each part of the University is free to choose the most appropriate approach for its particular purpose, given their different organisational cultures, histories and plans for the future.

Within the higher education and corporate areas of the University, each year, each organisational unit can also choose the key process or processes that by their own assessment is most in need of improvement, and they are encouraged to develop innovative solutions to address their identified quality problems. The system’s overall focus is clearly on self-directed educational and service quality improvement at the organisational unit level, but it includes aspects of quality assurance and change management at the institutional level, as appropriate to different organisational needs and priorities.

In this approach there is something for the educationalists and also something for the institutional planners because this approach places *continuous organisational learning* at the very centre of how we

attempt to manage the organisation's total business. What is important here is that this approach to organisational learning encourages what the archaeologist Steven Mithen calls the human facility for 'cognitive fluidity'.

*"In summary, science, like art and religion, is a product of **cognitive fluidity**. It relies on psychological processes which had originally evolved in specialised cognitive domains and only emerged when these processes could work together, Cognitive fluidity enabled technology to be developed which could solve problems and store information. Of perhaps even greater significance, it allowed the development of powerful metaphors and analogy, without which science could not exist"*

(Mithen, 1996, p.246)

To conclude, when confronted by a definitional dichotomy like the Quality one you really only have a limited number of options open, to avoid being caught on the 'horns of a dilemma' (for some reason the metaphor that comes to mind is that of facing a charging bull!). You can try to avoid facing the problem altogether - in a 'learning organisation' this is not a very smart move. You can concentrate on trying to grab hold of only one horn (say educational quality) or the other (say institutional performance) at a time - my research suggests that this approach is fairly short-sighted. One could be easily gored by the other horn if you don't watch it!

Or, you can try to firmly grasp both horns simultaneously. Though not for the faint-hearted, it is the sort of approach I have advocated in this paper – a *total quality* one.

A critical success factor for this sort of approach to work is to bind the educational quality improvement system closely to the university's other business planning and performance reporting systems. At Swinburne, this is an area that still needs a lot more work to improve further - but the important thing is that we are aware how important it is and working to improve it.

I couldn't resist finishing with this quotation I got from an article in the August '99 edition of New Scientist. It's from one Sylos Labini, an astronomer at the University of Geneva working on a 'fractal' model of the universe - ie. a 'lumpy', 'non-hierarchical' universe:

"Facing a hard problem is far more interesting than hiding it under the rug of an inconsistent procedure".

(Labini 1999, p26)

In education, the idea of quality, in all its various manifestations, is far too important to be left to the institutional planners by the educators and vice-versa. The down side is that in a university there is likely to be no simple, universal, single-dimensional, working definition of quality that will equally satisfy everyone. But again, I doubt if there ever was, or ever will be!

To conclude this session, participants are requested to reflect and engage on how their own institution handles the Quality issue at the education / institutional planning interface.

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ENDNOTES

¹ SQMS Version 1.3 © stands for the Swinburne Quality Management System, based on the Scottish Quality Management System © Scottish Enterprise.

² In 1998 Swinburne TAFE Division merged with the Eastern Institute of TAFE, effectively doubling the size of the Division. Both TAFE operations already had their own ISO quality systems and these are now merged in the new system.