

THE QUALITY PROGRAM OF THE LIBRARY AND LEARNING RESOURCES SERVICE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL LANCASHIRE

By Peter Brophy

Abstract: The Library of the University of Central Lancashire has implemented the ISO 9000 Quality Management System and is the first major Library known to have done so. In the implementation process the Library has fundamentally researched the concept of "quality" as applied to a publicly-funded service and has shown that strategic and operational approaches to quality management are both important alongside "continuous quality improvement". ISO 9000 offers an internationally recognised framework for quality management and is particularly powerful at the operational level. This paper describes the approach that the University Library has taken, and emphasises that the success of any quality management system can only be judged by the impact it has on the services received by the Library's users.

Introduction

The University of Central Lancashire, formerly Lancashire Polytechnic, is one of the so-called "new universities" of the United Kingdom, although its foundation can be traced back to one of the Mechanics' Institute's founded in the 1820s. It is interesting to note that the very first employee of the Institute was the librarian, and he was remunerated in part through a percentage of students' fees! Since those early days the University has grown, at first steadily and in the last few years dramatically, and now educates approximately 15,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students, of whom about 2,000 study University courses at partner colleges throughout the region, at distances of up to 100 kilometres from the main campus. In addition there is an increasing emphasis on research, with considerable investment in a wide range of research-oriented departments and centres: the newly created Centre for Research in Library & Information Management being one example. The pressure of demand on the Library and Learning Resources Service has increased in this period not just because of increasing numbers of users and increasing research but also reflecting changing teaching and learning methods which place much greater emphasis on "student-centred" approaches. For example, we have given high priority to encouraging students to develop

information-handling skills which will be of value to them throughout life, but this in itself encourages them to make wider and more sophisticated use of information sources.

Like higher education in the rest of the UK and indeed throughout the world, the resources available to us to provide library and information services have kept up neither with demand nor with technological change. So, from a management perspective the challenge is increasingly one of providing the highest quality service possible to users while developing the service itself as fast as possible (so that it remains relevant), yet all the time with a diminishing resource base.

The way in which I and my colleagues have chosen to respond to this challenge is by no means unique and we have been at pains to draw on best practice from other libraries and from other organisations. We have tended to avoid adopting any one "system" of management, but instead to draw on what we believe to be important and workable in our context, and to develop our own management systems capable of delivering high quality services to our users. At the end of the day, what matters is not the management process itself but what it enables staff to deliver and users to exploit in other words the key question is whether users are receiving the best possible library services we can provide.

The professional literature is full of papers about user needs, but we have found it useful to begin our analysis outside librarianship and with the concept of "quality" itself. In our discussions we began with the official International Standards Organisation (ISO) definition of quality: "Quality is the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs"¹. We found this interesting, for emphasis is on needs and self-evidently those needs in the context of the library are the needs of the users rather than of the staff. We found it particularly useful to focus on the commonly encountered twin concepts of quality as "fitness for purpose" and "conformance to requirements". As with many definitions of quality, both show their origins in manufacturing where it is possible to draw up a contract which clearly states the precise specification, the tolerances allowed, the delivery schedule, and so on. But they can also be applied to service industries, where they emphasise that quality is inextricably linked to customer needs. It is the *customer's* requirements that the high quality library service conforms to: it is a service that fits the *customer's* purposes.

However, in the public sector, the library manager usually has a fixed budget, in the short term, with which to deliver services. The industrial manager may be able to accept additional orders and use that guaranteed income to borrow funding to set up a second production line. A computer maintenance company can offer

higher levels of cover to customers for an increased fee. The library manager rarely has such opportunities. The users only influence the library budget in a very indirect manner, and by and large the library manager has to make the best use of what finance is already available, at least in the short term. Income generation may help, of course, but it will essentially be at the margin.

This consideration led us to modify our working definition of quality in the academic library context to the following:

"Quality is *the closest fit to users' needs that resources permit*".

The definition of "users' needs" also needs handling with care in an academic setting, where users may not themselves be fully aware of their needs: finding out is part of education! In practical terms the university itself has to take some responsibility for defining those needs that are legitimate, although this itself leads to a fine balance between the university's view and that of the users themselves. The fact that the university pays the bills is not irrelevant!

Quality management

If that is our definition of "quality", what does it imply for management? In fact there is a very real sense in which quality management is no more or less than management itself: what else are we doing if not trying to provide "the closest fit to users' needs that resources permit"? But the concept of quality does provide some useful insights. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, a concentration on quality in manufacturing and service industries has thrown up a plethora of techniques and management systems, some of which are highly relevant to public services. Secondly, because the concept of quality is essentially "user driven" it concentrates the mind on the user - not a foreign idea to most librarians but no bad thing in itself. Thirdly, the dominant concepts of quality management (and of Total Quality Management (TQM) in particular) emphasise that *everyone* in the organisation must be involved and that the organisation must be viewed as a whole. No one person (and certainly not the "quality manager") is responsible for quality: providing for users' needs (including colleagues' needs - the "internal users") is the responsibility of everyone: this has profound implications for organisational structures.

Our approach

As I have already indicated, we have *not* adopted a single quality management system and forced the Library into its mould, although we have adopted parts and in some cases the whole of relevant approaches. In this paper, I want to concen-

trate on our adoption of the ISO 9000 quality system, not least because it has few parallels in libraries in the public sector. In order to show how our ISO 9000 work fits into the broader quality management approach, I would suggest that it is useful to consider three "levels" of quality management:

- a) At the strategic level there needs to be an overview of the Library's performance and success in meeting strategic aims, thus contributing to the achievement of the Institution's mission. For example, what proportion of the student body leaves the institution with well-developed information skills? This level may be thought of as coming within the broad "fitness for purpose" definition, where the institution has a leading role in defining purpose. The key question is: "What should we be doing?"
- b) At the operational level there needs to be attention to the quality of service the individual user receives. For example, are staff polite and helpful? Here we are looking more at the "conformance to requirements" definition, where the user's definition of requirements is uppermost. The key question is: "How should we be doing it?"

Clearly the two overlap but the distinction is useful if we are to be assured that (i) the institution runs a quality library service, and (ii) the individual customer receives a quality service. These distinctions are particularly apposite in the academic context.

There is also a third dimension, which is to do with monitoring, maintaining and improving quality. Since both of the above two approaches are (or could be) static, addressing quality at a point in time, we also need

- c) Continuous quality improvement to avoid losing relevance to current needs and to position ourselves to meet the future. We might characterise this as "quality of change" or "future quality". It involves staff development and other mechanisms to enable staff to improve the quality of the service they offer, and mechanisms to enable us to review the service on offer, for example by user surveys, quality groups and other feedback.

ISO 9000

Rather than attempt to describe the different features which make up our whole quality management system, I want now to concentrate on ISO 9000 and firstly to examine our reasons for using the ISO 9000 approach. It is unusual to find this system used in academic institutions and we are not aware of any other university libraries which are taking this approach at the present time. However, we see ISO 9000 as offering a major ingredient in the successful delivery of quality at the

operational level (again, let us emphasise that these "levels" are artificial boundaries that are no more than a convenience for describing the approach).

It is important to recognise that the key to ISO 9000 lies in:

- Establishing agreed procedures for all aspects of the operation;
- Defining who in the organisation is responsible for each procedure;
- Documenting those procedures;
- Ensuring that staff are trained to follow the procedures;
- Auditing that the procedures are being followed;
- Monitoring the effectiveness of the procedures in relation to customer need.

It may seem less bureaucratic if this is put as:

- Continuously reassessing what you are doing;*
- Saying what you will do;*
- Making sure that you have done it.*

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that ISO 9000 is not a system for assuring the quality of a *product* but rather a quality *management* system. However, that fact itself demonstrates that ISO 9000 lies firmly in the modern tradition of building quality into the product rather than checking the quality of the product once it has been delivered. Rather than detect poor quality services after the event, it aims to prevent poor quality occurring in the first instance. The ideal is that every user will receive the highest quality service every time: quality management systems will move us towards that ideal. It is also important to note that the ISO 9000 standard is more of a checklist of requirements than a specification: the library defines its own procedures and can change them as often as it wishes, provided that they are properly documented, staff are properly trained, and the procedures actually being used are audited to see that they are the same as those claimed to be in use. Used properly, ISO 9000 is not a barrier to continuous change but merely a means of ensuring that changes are introduced systematically and consistently.

The basis of ISO 9000 is that it is concerned with *procedures*. It is not as alien to libraries as it might at first seem, since most of us have had a procedures manual of some kind for years. Indeed we were pleasantly surprised to be advised by our consultant that we had already done half the work in writing a procedures manual. Unfortunately, we found that we were unable to demonstrate that every copy of the manual was identical - you'll all have come across the hand-written annotations made by hard-pressed enquiry desk staff in their own copy! Neither could we prove that we actually followed the procedures to the letter - after all how many people do? So to meet the standard the basic procedures needed to be tightened up and uniformly applied; we needed to ensure the consistency of the service. We

needed also to document our adherence to the procedures and to introduce internal audit.

The user

I have already emphasised that the user is central to our management philosophy, and that our use of quality management systems is firmly based in our belief that the users' needs must come first. There is again a misconception that ISO 9000 is purely an internal management tool which by concentrating on the "how" of management ignores the real need of users. I have to say that in our experience that is not the case. We track our users' needs and their satisfaction with services through regular surveys, a suggestion box scheme, formal and informal links with departments and consultation on policy and strategy. The process of preparing for ISO 9000 has concentrated our minds on the links between what we do and what our users say they want. It is much easier to track the success of an organisation in meeting user needs when its services are mapped out clearly for everyone to see.

That brings me to another question of relevance to quality management systems and users. In the U.K. there is a strong, government led initiative to introduce charters for users of public services. We have health service charters, railway users' charters and so on. We are about to have a higher education charter. That document will state, in some detail, what services a higher education "customer" can expect to receive. While it will not document library services, the principle is clear. Customers should be given information on what level of service they have a right to expect and organisations should monitor the level of service they are actually delivering. The ISO 9000 quality system fits into this concept very well, since it is based on very much the same principle of stating what will be done and monitoring that it is being done. To give a simple example: it is not better to publish the fact that there are likely to be queues at the service desk at peak times, that the Library will aim to ensure that no-one has to queue for more than five minutes and then to publish statistics showing actual performance against that aim, rather than either resigning oneself to unspecified but often lengthy queues as a fact of life and complaining to users that we're short staffed so what do you expect?

The lessons we have learned

We still have a long way to go! It will be years before we can claim to have a tried and tested quality management system honed to perfection - and no doubt that will be the time to scrap it and start again! But we are learning lessons as we go

along, and at the risk of washing dirty linen in public I would like to end this short account by pointing to some of these lessons.

- the accepted wisdom is that staff should be actively involved in the production of procedures affecting their own areas of work, and we have made an attempt to accomplish this. However, we have not really succeeded, mainly because of lack of time and pressure of operational tasks. As a way of involving staff we are running workshops where staff can test draft procedures, often written by the line manager or senior in isolation, for their areas of work. This seems to work very well, and can be used to help staff appreciate that they have a measure of control over the procedures themselves. On an ongoing basis I hope that these workshops will become workgroups and quality circles, where all staff will be empowered to identify the barriers to quality, to come up with solutions and to implement those solutions. You will recognise that our relatively loose team-based organisational structure will assist this process. The main problem so far identified is that loyalty to a particular group can encourage the formation of relatively hard inter-group boundaries.

- ISO 9000 in particular (but other quality management approaches are not guiltless) is jargon-ridden. Who, for example, would think of a student owing fines for books returned late as a "non-conforming product"? We are therefore preparing an "idiot's guide" to the terminology, which we launched to staff with a "word search" competition (the prize was a box of Quality Street chocolates!).

- it is impossible to communicate too much and we have at times fallen down by communicating too little. One of the worst traps of quality (or any other) management is for senior staff to commit themselves and think that everyone else is committed as well. Staff overwhelmed by day to day tasks need constant motivation and constant communication if they are to be committed to the system. Some of the ideas we are trying include a Quality Notice Board with a chart showing progress etc., a news-sheet dedicated to quality issues, question and answer session and workshops. Some of these events have to be made compulsory to ensure that "pressure of work" does not prevent people attending.

- perhaps the key issue is one of ownership. We appointed a member of staff as "Quality Co-ordinator" before we had even taken the decision to go for ISO 9000 accreditation. Staff naturally than assumed that the Quality Co-ordinator was responsible for quality! She is - but so is everyone else. Of course, all staff feel very strongly about the standard of service we pro-

vide. The challenge for management is to relate those concerns about the service to quality as a concept in general and to the particular quality management system (ISO 9000 or whatever) being introduced.

- there is an enduring problem with the word "quality" itself, and it sometimes feels as if it would be better to forget that term and use something else. The common conception of a quality service is of a "Rolls Royce" service, not one "fit for the purpose". Add the idea that quality is constrained by resources and there are real difficulties in the use of the term.

Conclusion

Committing one's library to an explicit "quality" approach to management reminds one of those car stickers popularised in Britain by animal rights campaigners that proclaim "a dog is for life, not for Christmas!". It is a long haul, that requires commitment from everyone in the organisation. In fact, staff are all committed to providing the best service they can, but in the past efforts have not always been as well focused as they might have been - which is a criticism of management, not of operational staff. The quality management approach helps to focus all activities on meeting the needs of the customers, acknowledges that resources are always limited and encourages the Library to explicitly prioritise its efforts to achieve a range of services that truly meet users' needs. It is the users who ultimately will judge its effectiveness.

References

1. International Standards Organisation. ISO 8402-1986 Quality Vocabulary; International Terms. ISO, 1986.
2. International Standards Organisation. ISO 9000-1987, ISO 9001-1987, ISO 9002-1987, ISO 9004-1987, ISO 9005-1987. ISO, 1987.

Note: An earlier version of this paper appeared in *Aslib Information* 21(6), June 1993, pp. 246-248.

© Author 1993

Peter Brophy
University of Central Lancashire, Library
Centre for Research in Library & Information
Management (CERLIN)
Preston, Lancashire PR1 2HE
United Kingdom