Defining Quality in Public Administration

by

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Paper for the Session on
Quality in Public Administration: Basic Concepts and Comparative Perspective

Working Group on Better Quality Administration for the Public
Building Quality Administration for the Public in
Central and Eastern Europe

NISPAcee Conference, May 10-13
Riga, Latvia
Introduction

What is the likelihood that two or more strangers would have the same expectations when it comes to deciding what is a high quality public service and what isn’t? In deciding quality, we might assume that people consider various and multiple attributes of a given service or product and assign different weights to each attribute before reaching a decision.

One person may look primarily to the fitness for use of the service, while another may look on how timely the service is provided. Realistically, most individuals might be assumed to use some combinations of these factors to assess quality.

It becomes obvious that quality is a complex concept. While the quality of products and services is already hard to assess the assessment of organisational or even policy programme quality is even more difficult. The assessment of governance quality is likely to most demanding and first pilots in this area are only starting now.

The objective of the paper is to establish basic working definitions which assist the exchange of international experiences and the dialogue on improving quality in public administration.

The paper starts with an analysis on the way in which the concept of quality evolved in the private and public sector. It will be shown that quality is not a new concept for public administration but today’s notion of quality public services clearly stems for the business concept of Total Quality Management (TQM). The author goes on to discuss the three key issues in assessing quality in the public sector: selecting the right quality measures and indicators, using the right assessment instrument and involving the right stakeholders. The paper will conclude by stressing that improving the quality of services may increase customer satisfaction but not necessarily trust in government, Parliament and the civil service. In order to improve trust in public administration a much wider concept of quality is needed, which evaluates the quality of interaction of networks of public, voluntary, and private organisations providing public services and solving collective problems.

Definitions of Quality

Changing Quality Concepts in the Private Sector

(Total) quality management has its roots in the private sector, as do so many government reforms. Thus, it may beneficial to analyse the “history” of TQM in the private sector in order to improve our understanding of the potential and limits of TQM. As table 1 shows, TQM is the last development in the evolution of quality management systems in the private sector at present. It follows from the trajectory of quality management systems that TQM is unlikely to be the final answer to quality management. As environmental conditions continue to change gradually there will be also the need for a new quality management system.

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<tr>
<td>Definition of Quality</td>
<td>conformance to technically specified norms and standards</td>
<td>conformance to technically specified norms and standards</td>
<td>fitness for use</td>
<td>conformance to customer requirements</td>
<td>achieving maximum of customer satisfaction</td>
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<td>Quality Management System</td>
<td>quality inspection</td>
<td>statistical quality control</td>
<td>system-oriented quality assurance</td>
<td>company-wide quality-control</td>
<td>total quality management</td>
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<td>Parameter of the Quality</td>
<td>final product</td>
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The history of private sector quality management in the Western hemisphere can be divided into five phases:

(1) Quality inspection

The starting point of private sector quality management was the breakdown of the Japanese telephone network after World War II (Ishikawa, 1985:15). The American Allied Forces as well as Japanese industry regarded the low quality of the telephone network as the main reason for this problem. As a consequence, efforts were made to apply modern methods of quality inspection. This meant that monitoring activities became the exclusive task of additional hierarchical and functional units.

Quality inspection had a purely technical function: it had to detect the good products and let them pass and had to stop the bad product. The percentage of unacceptable products determined the quality of the production. Quality consisted of “conformance to requirements” (Crosby, 1979:17), specified as a list of technical characteristics. Since quality inspection focused on the final product solely, it usually had no implications for productivity.

The main management instruments were technically specified norms and standards that helped to carry out inspections correctly. All in all, quality inspection had an important function in creating common industrial norms in post-war Japan and later in the U.S. and Western Europe (Wongigeit, 1994:34). Nevertheless, quality inspection suffered from the fact that total inspection of all products was impossible and that conclusions from small samples were not representative. As a result, the ratio of detecting defects by quality inspection was low and quality inspection therefore inaccurate.

(2) Statistical quality control

In order to overcome this problem quality inspection was further developed to statistical quality control. This phase of quality management was strongly influenced by the U.S. quality expert Deming. Deming
stressed the importance of variation problems and its causes. In particular, he distinguished between systematic mistakes caused by men or machines and random mistakes like bad quality input factors. The main management instruments were statistical methods like sampling methods. The mass production of armament during the Second World War also encouraged statistical quality control in the U.S. and Great Britain (Zink and Schildknecht, 1992:76). Statistical quality control still focused on the end product and was the task of specialized inspection departments.

The environment of these early quality management systems was characterized by the “basic needs era” (Reiss and Zydromomyslaw, 1994:34). This meant that the fulfillment of basic needs had first priority in terms of individual goals which was made possible by mass production on large scale. On markets, the price was the decisive competitive parameter. In terms of quality, the goal function of producers was to produce a certain level of quality at least cost. This concept of quality and quality control is only adequate for goods which the producer can specify before sale (and the consumer can investigate the characteristics before purchase). Nelson (1979) defines this type of goods as search goods. The Ford Tin Lizzy would clearly fall into this category, to give one example. This producer-oriented perspective (Bouckaert, 1992:7) defined quality at the output level as a set of features of a good or service corresponding to a predetermined description of the good or service to be produced.

Quality, in this sense, was an objective concept (Bouckaert, 1992:7) since the judgment on quality was based on quantitative data. Specialized functional divisions were responsible for the assessment of product quality, which is a third-party assessment from the workers’ perspective. At the same time, it is a static view that emphasizes technical conformance, no matter how much the specification for a product may have become inappropriate for the circumstances in which this product must now be used.

(3) System-oriented quality assurance

In the 1950s, environmental conditions changed. Successful organisations now had to manage external rather than internal systems (Walsh, 1991:504). The meaning of quality therefore shifted to quality as “fitness for use” (Juran, 1979a:2). This definition of quality means meeting the objectives of the various customers. In order to do so, quality management in Japan then turned to quality assurance which “is broadly the prevention of quality problems through planned and systematic activities” (Oakland, 1993:15).

The focus is no more on the final product but on the production process. Quality improvement takes place by root cause analysis (Juran, 1979b:16-9 – 16-44). The aim is to raise product quality continuously and to adapt it to the changing needs of customers.

The behaviour of customers is determined by increasing material well-being and forming a critical attitude towards technical progress in the “growth era” (Reiss and Zydromomyslaw, 1994:34). Markets are characterized by globalization and shorter product cycles. Low prices are no more sufficient to attract customers in buyer markets. Quality has become a competitive parameter and a strategic goal for companies. The types of goods being produced have also changed: with the service sector becoming larger at the expense of the industrial sector, experience goods (Nelson, 1979) become more and more important. Experience goods are those which are impossible, impracticable or too expensive to investigate before purchase.

This has several implications for the judgment of quality which becomes a function of individual perceptions and expectations. This “consumer-oriented, subjective quality” vision (Bouckaert, 1992:8) measures quality at the effect-level as the “fitness for use” (Juran, 1979a:2). Even though system-oriented quality assurance was based on the idea that “quality is everybody’s job” (Feigenbaum, 1983:158), in practice responsibility for quality assurance has only shifted from inspection departments to top management. Therefore, it is legitimate to refer to the assessment concept of quality as third-party assessment from the perspective of the operational level.

(4) Company-wide quality-control
Company-wide quality control was introduced by Ishikawa in 1968 (Ishikawa, 1985:91). The basic concept of quality is similar to Juran’s: quality requirements are derived from individual needs and translated into technical specifications. However, customer-orientation does not only refer to the external, but also to the internal customer so that the whole company may be interpreted as a network of customer-relationships. As a consequence, all management efforts concentrate on the fulfillment of customer needs.

Market research has an important function in company-wide-quality-control, using techniques such as quality function deployment (Sullivan, 1986:18). Company-wide-quality-control means that all functional divisions and employees are responsible for meeting customers’ requirements in the production process. Quality in this management system becomes a strategic business issue and is seen as the key success factor for long-term competitiveness (Ishikawa, 1985: 104 ff.).

The evolution of quality from a technical function to a strategic business goal may be explained by the change of the external environment. The “quality era” (Reiss and Zydromomyslaw, 1994:34) may be characterized by a general consciousness and awareness of quality among customers as well as by competition through quality. Today’s service economy is based on personal company-customer relationships rather than on standardized production processes, which is the reason for quality becoming a subjective concept.

Comprehensive quality management concepts like company-wide-quality-control try to combine the old producer-oriented quality control and customer-oriented quality assurance concept so that the idea of customer-orientation is also introduced into the production process: The preceding production units become the internal customers of the performance recipients in the added-value chain. The term product therefore includes each single output of a production process. Since customer requirements have to be met at every stage of the production process every employee has to make sure that the products have all the necessary quality specifications. Thus, quality assessment is based on self-assessment.

Company-wide-quality-control and TQM are often referred to as synonyms in literature. Even though their approach and emphasis is similar, there are important differences.

(5) Total quality management

In the Western world, TQM was seen as one of the success factors for the Japanese becoming the number one in the electronics and car market. Indeed, TQM was widely and apparently successfully applied to Japanese manufacturing industry in the late 1970s and 1980s and was subsequently re-exported to the West in the 1980s (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1994:4). It percolated from manufacturing to the commercial services sector and eventually to public services.

The U.S. Department of Defense provides a comprehensive definition of TQM in its Total Quality Management Guide which states that

“TQM is both a philosophy and a set of guiding principles that represent the foundation of a continuously improving organisation. TQM is the application of quantitative methods and human resources to improve materials and services supplied to an organisation, to improve all the processes within the organisation, and to improve the degree to which the needs of the customer are met, now and in the future. TQM integrates fundamental management techniques, existing improvement efforts and technical tools under a disciplined approach focused on continuous improvement” (U.S. Department of Defense, 1990:11).

TQM is based on a definition of quality that comes from consumer psychology literature and sets customer expectations as the first and ultimate goal of each activity in an organisation. In order to function properly, TQM requires the full and active involvement of all employees to a corporate quality plan as well as comprehensive information
systems that collect and process information with regard to customers, suppliers, corporate-wide processes and competitors. TQM also requires a willingness to invest substantially in training. Last but not least, TQM involves cultural change towards continuous improvement.

It becomes obvious that TQM is a very demanding quality management system and challenging to implement even in for-profit business settings. As the following chapter will suggest, TQM has to be modified to make it appropriate for use in public services.

Summing-up, the private sector’s understanding of quality has changed considerably over time. In particular, three key concepts of quality may be distilled from the detailed description above:

- Technical conformity with norms and standards or specifications based on engineering science
- “Fitness for use” based on systems analysis
- Fulfill or exceed customer’s expectations based on customer psychology.

**Changing Quality Concepts in the Public Sector**

Even though TQM is a new quality management system for the public sector, this does not imply that public administration was not quality oriented in the past. Quality has always played a role in the public administration, at least implicitly, but the meanings have changed over time.

Beltrami (1992:770) distinguished three phases in the evolution of quality in the public sector:

- quality in the sense of respect of norms and procedures;
- quality in the sense of effectiveness; and
- quality in the sense of customer satisfaction.

In the first case, quality means the absence of arbitrary, or to express it in a positive way, formal correctness. Of course, in this definition, the reference to the user or customer is missing. This understanding of quality in the public administration corresponds to the early notion of quality as technical conformance to specification in industry.

The meaning of quality in the public sector changed in the late 1960s when management by objectives gained popularity in public administration. Quality in the public sphere would still include the absence of errors but also starts to link the concept of quality with the purpose/a product/service would serve. This definition of quality has its equivalent in Juran’s famous definition of quality as “fitness for use”.

In the early eighties, the “total quality” concept of the private sector was transferred to the public sector in North America and Western Europe, making customer satisfaction or even customer delight the point of reference for the degree of quality achieved. Nevertheless, this does not imply that all Western countries apply the same concept of quality in the public sector. Even though most public agencies are familiar with the business concept of quality (in particular, its rhetoric) by now public administration in many countries still reduces quality to compliance with the law. This is particularly true in Continental European countries with an administrative law tradition.

There has been a lot of debate on whether quality concepts from the private sector can be transferred to the public sector in some meaningful way. Whereas TQM proponents tend to argue that big private companies and big public authorities face the same kind of bureaucratic problems more critical TQM experts argue that the private and public sector operate under different framework conditions (Halachmi, 1995).

It seems, however, that this debate has become somewhat abstract since the public-private sector dichotomy does not exist any more to a large extent in most Western countries. As a result of contracting-out, public services are provided by public, private and voluntary organisations. Administrative modernisation programmes along the lines of “New Public Management” has also created a range of organisations with mixed forms of public-private ownership. Thus, the borders between public, private and
voluntary sectors have become increasingly blurred. In other words, “the” public sector does not exist any more.

This should not be misinterpreted that the introduction of business-oriented concepts of quality management into the public sector does not raise problems (see also Swiss, 1992). In particular, two issues merit some further discussion.

One transfer problem has to do with the nature of services as opposed to the qualities of goods. As the evolution of quality management systems in the private sector shows they have their origin in the industrial sector producing goods. Yet, the public sector mainly provides services (either directly or indirectly through contractors). In most cases, quality management systems for evaluating and ensuring goods quality are inadequate for assessing service quality (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990:15).

According to Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990:15), this inadequacy stems from three fundamental differences between services and goods:

- Services are rather intangible so that precise manufacturing specification can rarely be set.
- In particular services with a high labour content are heterogeneous.
- Production and consumption of many services are inseparable.

This has far-reaching consequences for concepts of quality controls and quality management. For instance, in manufacturing industry, quality should be aimed at early in the production process (upstream) rather than being added at the end (downstream). In the case of services, however, production and consumption often coincide. Quality management in co-production processes has to focus on the appearance and behaviour of the person delivering the service as well as on the appearance and behaviour of the customer. For example, a timely processing of tax declaration forms requires customer-friendly forms and effective advice of the tax authority as well as carefully filled out forms by the taxpayer.

Another transfer problem can be identified in policy-oriented sectors of public administration. The implementation of TQM in different public agencies has shown that business-oriented concepts of quality work best in public agencies that operate under market conditions like public enterprises. TQM still works rather well in public agencies providing services with some degree of market pressure such as local authorities. However, ministries and other agencies with a strong focus on policy-making find it rather difficult to think and operate on the basis of TQM.

Instead of being prompted by key client concerns or market opportunities, the incentives for instituting TQM in public agencies typically emanate from middle-level managers. TQM is seen as a means to improve the external image of the public agency, to solve internal problems or to promote the career of the change agent(s). The question is whether the engagement of the middle management with a high turn-over rate may create enough pressure to go the painful way of sustaining employee motivation for (total) quality in the agency. Much more empirical research has to be done why and how quality management starts in the public sector (Bouckaert, 1992:9).

**Assessing Quality in the Public Sector**

*Determining Quality Measures and Indicators*

It has always been a human desire to reduce complexity to understandable dimensions. “Quality, as a an example of this complexity is also subject to this desire” (Bouckart, 1995:26). Thus, scholars as well as practitioners have made various attempts to find a quality measure which can capture several dimensions of quality and views of different stakeholders (employees, customers, etc.). Yet, relying on a single quality index is always risky for management: first, it creates a dimension which is not at all transparent as the different dimensions of quality are hidden. Secondly, it also allows for dimensions to be compensated. For example, customer service may be traded of against additional features of a product.
Given that quality is a multi-dimensional concept it is more meaningful to define a whole set of measures instead of relying on a sole index. For example, the quality of a public swimming pool may be assessed on the basis of utility, equipment, reliability, conformance to norms, stability, friendliness of service, design and perception of the product (Garvin, 1987:104f). For services, Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990:23) have identified the following quality dimensions that influence customer’s view of quality:

- Tangibles
- Reliability
- Responsiveness
- Competence
- Courtesy
- Credibility
- Security
- Access
- Communication
- Understanding the Customer.

Parallel to these quality dimensions Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) have also developed a model that links customer-perceived quality deficiencies to quality deficiencies within companies.

The definition of a set of quality measures is only a first step in the process of quality measurement. Quality measures have to be made operational with quality indicators. Typically, the quality indicators are categorised as quantitative versus qualitative and subjective versus objective. Subjective quality indicators can always be quantified. They are usually based on some type of survey which measures the reactions or expectations of a group of respondents. Objective quality indicators, however, cannot always be quantified. For example, it may be hard to construct an objective quantitative indicator measuring the comfort of waiting rooms in public agencies. Even though quantitative indicators such as the room temperature and the size of the waiting area may give some hints about the basic equipment of the waiting room qualitative provide much more useful information. Ideally, a sound set of quality indicators should include both quantitative and qualitative indicators.

For measurement to be meaningful, quality indicators also have to fulfill certain quality standards. “Smart” quality indicators should be:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Time-related

Since the search for such ideal quality indicators is rather time-consuming and also requires experience and knowledge which indicators support the purpose of an organisation “ready-of-the peg” quality measurement systems have become quite popular in the private as well as in the public sector (with some time lag). They include a comprehensive set of quality indicators which may be used to measure different things.

In the following, the basic objective and structure of the ISO 9000 series, citizen’s charters and quality excellence models will be described briefly. All of these instruments have become wide-spread and often used for the wrong purpose. Therefore, a critical assessment of their limitations will be provided as well.

*An Overview of Various Quality Assessment Instruments*
The ISO 9000 Series and Third Party Certification

The ISO 9000 series is an internationally recognised standard for quality assurance. (ISO is the International Organisation for Standardisation, which is a federation of national standards bodies, and which is responsible for preparing international standards.) The international standard gives indications how to set up quality systems in organisations where a contract between seller and buyer requires the demonstration of a supplier’s ability to supply to mutually agreed requirements.

Not surprisingly, the standardisation approach has its roots in the military business. In the 1960s, the techniques of quality management practiced in the USA were beginning to attract attention in Western Europe and so the British Ministry of Defense introduced standards as a means of codifying the quality management system of suppliers (Ware, 1993:5). Other major purchasers, particularly in the public sector, industries followed suit. The success of this approach in Great Britain prompted BSI standards to produce a national standard. The British standard then served as a model for the ISO 9000 series that were published in 1987. ISO 9000 was also adopted by the European Community as EN 29000. By the end of 1992, there was an increasing number of European, but also U.S. and Japanese companies obtaining registration. The ISO 9000 series had become important for doing business in the European Community and thus helped to facilitate the free flow of goods.

The mysterious formula ISO 9000-9004, reveals itself as a synopsis of norms which needs to be understood as a guideline, as a benchmark for companies to improve their individual quality management but also fitting their needs and organisational characteristics.

With regard to the contents of ISO 9000-9004, it can be divided into three blocs (Bläsing, 1992:27):
- instruction to use, selection criteria (9000);
- guidelines for the development of quality management in one’s own responsibility (9004); and
- proposals aiming at preventing non-conformity in the framework of contract-based negotiations (9001, 9002, 9003). These three standards have recently been integrated into ISO 9001:2000.

It is apparent that the main focus of the ISO-system is the contracting situation. The recommended quality assurance system consists of 23 elements, out of which an organisation has to choose suitable elements for the formulation of contracts. The point of departure for the development of TQM is the non-contracting situation for which ISO 9004 gives instructions.

The establishment of a quality assurance and management system along ISO 9000 guidelines is connected with considerable costs (for a survey on those costs, see Bläsing, 1992:35). In view of this investment, industry wants to have the application of ISO 9000 certified. Independent, so-called third party certification offers the possibility of using quality as a marketing tool and avoids the disadvantages of second party activity and subjective judgment (Ware, 1993:6-8). Demand for the application and certification of ISO 9000 may be created by a need to extend a suppliers’ market into areas where his reputation is unknown or needs support. Especially the desired realization of the internal European market by the end of 1992 showed the need for a single consensus quality standard.

Regarding the value of the ISO 9000 series as a quality assessment instrument in public administration three issues have to be considered:
- ISO 9000 it primarily important for contractual situations such as contracting-out or competitive tendering to help public agencies evaluate the product or service quality of different suppliers and their expected quality level for the duration of the contract.
• The application of ISO 9000-9003 may be especially useful for organisational contexts which lack of transparent written or unwritten rules, structures and processes. The documentation required by the ISO standards may increase transparency but also risks to create unnecessary “red tape” and thus reduce flexibility.

• In most cases, however, public agencies will find it most useful to implement the ISO 9004 standards. This component lays the cornerstone for the development of TQM. Interestingly enough, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities based the Finnish municipal service standard exactly on ISO 9001 and 9004-2 standards.

In December 2000 a revised version of the ISO 9000 series was published by ISO (see http://www.iso.ch/9000e/selectionanduse.htm). The new ISO 9001:2000 series basically consists of the three former standards ISO 9001, ISO 9002 and ISO 9003. The ISO Technical Committee recommends that, beginning with ISO 9000:2000, organisations adopt ISO 9001:2000 which now specifies requirements for a basic quality management system for any organisation. The practices described in ISO 9004:2000 may then be implemented to reach higher levels of quality. Without going into details, it becomes obvious that the revised 2000 version locates ISO closer to quality excellence models.

(2) Citizen’s Charters

The essential idea behind charters is to increase the quality of services as perceived by service users. The ultimate purpose is to renew citizen trust not only in public services but also in the State. “Considering charters as purely technical documents describing intentional and planned quality improvement strategies underestimates the real scope and significance of these documents. The potential of charters is to express a consensus on a societal model on the behaviour and responsibilities, rights and duties, expectations and trust, of politicians in government, civil servants in public services and citizens” (Bouckaert, 1995:194).

Meanwhile, citizen’s charters have been set up in the UK (the Citizen’s Charter), in France (“La Chartered Services Publics”), in Belgium (“Chartre de l’Utilisateur des Services Publics – Handvest van de Gebruiker van de Openbare Diensten”), in Portugal (“The Public Service Quality Charter”) and in Italy (Carta di Servizi).

As Bouckaert concluded from a careful comparison of the Belgian, French and British charters, “there are different charters for different conceptions of quality in society” (Bouckaert, 1995:196). In the British Citizen’s Charter, the market is the point of departure and the general purpose is to increase competition and choice. The basic mechanism in the system to achieve quality is the pressure on the users on their producers to satisfy the recipients of public services. The French and Belgian charters, however, are based on the State and the legal framework of democracy. Their main intention is to improve public service delivery by maintaining an equilibrium of rights and duties between the various stakeholders.

Thus, even though charters generally focus on quality in public administration the underlying societal concept and the way in which quality is measured are different from each other. This applies in particular to the concept of citizens and customers.

As Bouckaert (1995:185) points out a citizen is defined “as a concentration of rights and duties within a constitutional State, within the rule of law, and a hierarchy of laws and regulations” The customer is a much more limited concept since the citizen is part of the social contract, whereas the customer is part of the market contract. When charters are used in the ideological context of “New Public Management”, charters may no longer be considered as a catalogue of rights and duties of the ruler and the ruled, but a “quality checklist” for public service users. This is especially true for the British Citizen’s Charter which would be more appropriately named “Customer’s Charter” (Bouckaert 1995:185).
(3) Quality Excellence Models

Most quality excellence models have first been developed for the private sector and have been transferred to the public sector as a result of a paradigm shift taking place in the public administration in Western countries. In Europe, they clearly cluster around two core models - the 1999 version of the European Excellence Model (previously known as the Business Excellence Model) and the 1998 version of the Speyer Quality Award for German-speaking countries. A detailed comparison identifies the following organisational and managerial key criteria, which are also found in most Western European national quality awards that involve public service organisations (see Löffler, 2001):

• leadership
• policy and strategy
• people
• resources
• processes
• different categories of “objective” and “subjective” results

Naturally, the weightings given to these different components and the sub-criteria used within them differ between the award schemes.

Quality excellence models may be used for self-assessment or as the basis of external assessment. In particular, the European Excellence Model (see http://www.efqm.org) has become a widely used self-assessment instrument in various Western European countries. Also the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) which was specifically designed for public administration starts to become a more and more common self-assessment instrument for public agencies (see http://www.eipa.nl/CAF/AssessmentForm.htm). In contrast to the European Excellence Model it is less demanding and therefore suitable for organisations starting with the implementation of TQM but also less systematic.

In many cases, quality awards are based on quality excellence models (the Speyer Quality Award is an exception to this). Quality awards are introduced as surrogates of market competition in the public sector where a market does not exist. The competition among the participants of an awards programme is intended to motivate public agencies to increase organisational quality. In case they win the award they are likely to act as a model for other organisations; in case they do not win the award, they hopefully learn how to become better in the future.

Public sector quality awards also have the function to help public authorities to improve their organisational quality by learning from each other. Quality awards identify excellent public agencies and their success factors are made visible to other organisations. This means that there is also a cooperative element in quality competition awards which is perhaps the most important function of quality awards if they are to be an instrument in fostering innovations and quality in the public sector.

It is obvious that there is a tension between the competitive and cooperative elements of public quality award competitions. On the one hand, participants of award programs want to know how good they are compared to other organisations. On the other hand, nobody wants to “lose” so that organisers of quality awards have to stress the cooperative element of the award. This trade-off that has to be made by the organisers reveals the inherent complexity of award programs.

The Role of Stakeholders in Quality Assessment

Apart from the issue what system of quality measures and indicators and which assessment instrument is most appropriate to measure quality a second key aspect of quality measurement is to decide which actors should take part in the process.

For a long time, the activity of quality measurement has been considered as a technical problem which just requires getting the measurement process right. However, without meaningful involvement of key
stakeholders, discussions of quality indicators and their attendant risks can become little more than insider conversations, which neither the press nor the citizens or politicians consider worthwhile or take seriously (Bovaird, 1999:153). Beyond this, quality measurement systems may be even distrusted by the staff who has to use them (Bouckaert, 1995:22). Thus, ownership and legitimacy should be defined in a broad sense.

Different stakeholders need to be involved, depending upon the nature of the services. Kieron Walsh distinguishes between personal and social services as well as between less and more complex services. Personal services are comparable to private goods and only benefit to the user who is entitled for a specific service. Social services, however, are like public goods which means that third parties may not be excluded to benefit from the service as well. For example, in most cases, it will be very hard to limit the sight of an enjoyable monument to be specific group of people. Whereas simple services require little professional knowledge complex services may only be provided by professionals.

Combining these two dimensions of service characteristics produces the matrix below. Table 2 provides answers to the question who knows best about the quality of different services.

Table 2: Service Characteristics and Stakeholder Involvement in Quality Measurement

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<th>Characteristics of services</th>
<th>Simple services</th>
<th>Complex services</th>
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<tr>
<td>Personal services</td>
<td>users</td>
<td>front-line employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services</td>
<td>politicians</td>
<td>service professionals</td>
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Source: Kieron Walsh, modified by the author.

It follows from table 2 that in the case of simple and personal services such as garbage collection users should participate in quality measurement programs. In the case of social services, politicians have to balance the advantages and disadvantages for different groups of stakeholders. Complex services, however, are rather an issue for staff involvement. In the case of personal services like medical consultation front-line staff such as nurses will be the most appropriate stakeholder to assess the quality of the service. If services are more complex as, for example, advising the population in a situation of the foot and mouth epidemic, then service professionals such as the research departments of the national health agency tend to have more information about potential consequences and risks of specific actions for the public than vets.

**From High Quality Public Services towards High Quality Public Administration**

There is empirical evidence that various quality improvement programmes in public administration have increased user satisfaction. Yet, at the same time, mass public surveys indicate a decrease in trust in national government, Parliament and the civil service. This indicates that there is no linear relationship between service quality and trust. As Bouckaert and Uusikylä (see http://www.iiasiisa.be/egpa/agvaasa/agvaasa.htm) point out perceptions of quality come from very specific observations of public services whereas trust refers to the government machinery in general. According to Bouckaert and Uusikylä, it may be possible to establish a relation between satisfaction about a certain service and trust in that service but it is not clear how satisfaction about specific services influences trust in government, especially since government cannot be considered as an accumulation of public services.

From this wider perspective, an excellent public agency is not simply one which has the characteristics of an excellent service provider. It must also be excellent in the way in which it discharges its political and social responsibilities its constituency. For example, excellent service provision does not guarantee that the streets are clean if citizens keep on throwing litter in the streets. It may prove necessary to teach children at school and at home appropriate civic behaviour in order to create a clean environment for citizens. In other words, quality improvement also requires a responsible civic society.

As a consequence, quality indicators should not only focus on measuring service quality as provided by an individual organization but also on the service system, and the overall quality of life in a specific jurisdiction.
Thus, a high quality public administration must not only be able to increase customer satisfaction with public services but also build trust in public administration through transparent processes and accountability and through democratic dialogue. In order to do so, conventional business concepts of quality which regard public agencies as service providers and citizens as customers must be enriched by a democratic concept of quality which perceives public agencies as catalysts of civic society and citizens as part of a responsible and active civic society.
References


