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Editorial: public service quality — between everything and nothing?

Christopher Pollitt

In 1973 Aaron Wildavsky published what subsequently became a famous article, entitled 'If planning is everything, maybe it's nothing' (Wildavsky, 1973). For reasons which will become apparent, our symposium on quality echoes this catchy title. Like planning in the 1960s and 1970s, 'quality' has become a vehicle to which almost everything that anyone wants to do to or with public services can be attached. And insofar as the concept of quality is given this omnibus, catch-all character, its usefulness dwindles. To paraphrase the popular philosophical dictum, if it means everything, then it means nothing.

There are numerous examples of this super-broad approach. A government ministry may encompass the whole range of public management reforms under the title 'Building sustainable quality' (Ministry of Finance, 2006). Or, in the hands of enthusiasts, improving quality can become a shorthand for a total institutional makeover:

Organizations must realize that TQM calls for systemic changes in management practice, including the redesign of work and organizational structures, the re-definition of management roles, the learning of new skills by employees at all levels, and the reorientation of organizational goals ... TQM cannot be grafted onto existing management structures and systems because it challenges conventional management techniques. In order to fully realize its benefits, the entire organization must change. (McGowan, 1995: 330)

Faced with such massive — and even threatening — claims it is perhaps not surprising that the appetite of the organizational leadership frequently cools, and that many quality improvement schemes fail or dwindle after generating only incremental improvements. Claiming a great deal at the beginning and looking mainly for 'quick

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wins' is often a recipe for disappointment (Pollitt et al., 2006: 3–4; Zbaracki, 1997). Predictably, perhaps, the zealot approach to quality improvement tends to inspire a few religious adherents but generates a rather larger number of sceptical onlookers (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1995: 4–8).

On the other hand, those who wish to give quality a narrowly defined, technical meaning (such as 'conformance to specified requirements') very often find that important issues escape or elude their focus. Fundamental questions of political representation and conflicting social values — issues which influence public services every minute of every day — cannot be captured by tight definitions of the specific service components that list six standards and 16 'deliverables' which users can expect from their providers (Maram, 2008).

Once definitional and conceptual choices have been made, problems of operationalization must also be confronted. Debates about measurement have played a substantial part in the history of the development of quality systems (Maram, 2008; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1995). Clearly, if a very broad conceptualization of quality is chosen, there will be a host of possible different aspects to measure, and any attempt to come up with a single-figure composite index will require sensitive decisions about aggregation procedures and weightings. But even if a narrower definition is selected, measurement issues can be tricky. For example, if one makes user satisfaction the focus of quality improvement, there is the issue of expectations to be taken account of. Some citizens may have very high expectations and be disappointed by a level of service that other citizens (with low expectations) perceive to be good. Users may give changing assessments over time (as in the case where some research seems to indicate that hospital patients gave higher ratings for their treatment if asked while still in hospital than they did later when they were at home). Users may also change their implicit standards, so that their satisfaction levels go up when an improvement is introduced, but then fall again when they get used to the new, elevated level of service. Thus both measurement and the interpretation of measurement is complex, and some public sector quality schemes have been rather amateurish in their adoption of crudely constructed questionnaires as their principal or only form of feedback.

From the outset, therefore, quality poses difficulties of both definition and operationalization. These difficulties are to some extent generic (influencing quality improvement efforts in the market sector as well as the public sector) but are also, in part, specific to public service contexts. Yet at the same time it has proven to be an immensely attractive concept, for a variety of reasons. To begin with, it is a word with wholly positive rhetorical connotations — who could be against 'quality'? We all want 'quality' — quality healthcare, quality education, quality neighbourhood policing, a quality passport service, even quality air and water. For this reason the quality label came in very handy in the late 1980s and early 1990s when politicians were attempting to soften the public perception of relentless, economy- and efficiency-driven cuts in public services (Pollitt, 1993: 188–96). If one could have greater efficiency *and* higher quality then much of the criticism of public sector reform could be answered. It may well be that, when cutbacks in public services follow the current extraordinary round of government spending on banks and firms in financial difficulty, we will once again start to hear about 'more for less' quality improvement programmes. In addition, quality is a term that resonates with many of the staff providing public services

— especially in the education/welfare/healthcare/human services sectors. They want to feel that they are offering a 'quality service' and that senior management supports 'continuous quality improvement'. In these ways the notion of quality conforms with older ideas of professional self-improvement and high standards. Such staff cannot sustain their commitment on a meagre diet of 'efficiency' alone. It would be ethically and operationally too thin for their daily sustenance. 'Quality' chimes with public service motivation (Perry and Hondeghem, 2008).

These appealing features of the concept (or, at least, the word) mean that, even when it goes out of fashion (as it sometimes has), it is liable to make a comeback. If we look at the histories of particular services in particular countries we can see what a convoluted rhetorical trajectory this can be. The label 'quality' itself waxes and wanes. In a given jurisdiction it may be 'in' for a few years and then it is 'out', replaced at the top of the buzz-word league table by 'benchmarking', 'integrated service delivery' or 'choice'. The European governments launched a series of major biennial public service quality conferences in 2000 — at just about the time when 'quality' was a fading term in the UK, but a rising one in some other European states, including the new EU member states of central and eastern Europe (Löffler and Vintar, 2004). These large 'QC' conferences continue (the most recent one being in Paris in 2008) and attract an extremely diverse set of presentations, together with a good deal of enthusiasm among the associated public service staff. Alongside the conferences have come a range of quality prizes and awards, as we shall see later in this issue. Similar devices have grown up in North America and other parts of the world. Once established, these kinds of arrangements and events, both national and international, serve to institutionalize commitment to formal quality improvement, thereby reducing the chances that it will just fade away completely. What they do not do, unfortunately, is ensure that support for individual projects will be sustained. All too often, a project that has won admiration at one quality conference will have disappeared by the time delegates gather for the next one (Pollitt et al., 2006).

From time to time, *IRAS* has carried important articles about public service quality, but usually only on an ad hoc basis. Recently, however, we decided that the time was ripe for a set of articles that would, collectively, take an overview of the current state of play. I am delighted to say that the response from those I approached has been both enthusiastic and productive. Thus we are able to combine several specially written articles with others that were offered rather than commissioned. We have achieved quite a good coverage, with articles looking at the North American (Holzer, Charbonneau and Kim), European (Bovaird and Löffler) and Asian (Kim) scenes, plus a more specific focus on one of the most intensively reformed and measured systems — UK local government (Radnor). Each of these articles — in different ways and to different degrees — wrestles with the issues introduced above, namely the (respective) problems of wide or narrow definitions of quality, the challenges of operationalizing such a plastic concept, the effects of changing political and managerial fashions and the difficulties of sustaining and diffusing good practice. There is no need to attempt to summarize the articles here; it is better that they speak for themselves.

What follows, therefore, is an international overview of a 'theme that won't go away'. 'Quality' has now survived as a term of art in public administration for roughly three decades. It has proved adaptable to different countries, languages and types

of political system — though such adaptability should not lead one to suppose that it has a single meaning or that there is one best model that can eventually be applied everywhere (Löffler and Vintar, 2004). It has survived several turns of the wheel of management fashion. It has spawned a basketful of tools and techniques. It has served to inspire groups of public servants to improve their own practices and do more to understand and listen to the citizens who use and/or pay for their services. Quality initiatives often fail. But sometimes they succeed. Either way, they deserve our attention and our analysis. This symposium marks a further step along the way.

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