Quality is in the eye of the beholder

The heart of this question about maintaining quality in a time of scare resources is about focussing on what is important, and who it is important to? A constant theme in TAFE and the Vocational Education and Training sector since the introduction of the first student entitlement model in Victoria in 2008 is about quality. So who is leading the charge on this? The first point of concern has been from those in the system primarily from TAFE, and to be fair also from ACPET who have been concerned about some providers and have subsequently rescinded ACPET membership. Then we had concerns being raised by employers, then parents and students and finally with enough debate from the community the media, government and regulators. I would argue that the perspective on quality was quite different from each group.

Undoubtedly some of the concern from those within the public providers is about an education service being delivered that it not at the same standard as it used to be, and some of that is coloured by concern about market share is being lost and the government funds are being “gouged by private providers”. Industry is concerned that the some skills are not being provided to a satisfactory or even safe level. Finally the government doesn’t want to look bad or unresponsive in the face of very public criticism, and a result ASAQ was then be called in to undertake audits.

The Government view on quality is very much about adequacy and value for money, the big picture view is about having about having higher qualifications for more people, to do that the unit cost needs to be less. In many ways this is consistent with the workshop theme of about maintaining quality in time of scare resources. In reality the focus is clearly not on the “Rolls Royce” model, with features and additions that the customer probably doesn’t want or need.

We also need to consider why students actually come to providers of VET. Fundamentally for the vast majority the learning is not the actual end, but a means to an end. As Professor Leesa Wheelahan describes it a qualification has three roles.

1. Labour market entry – a job
2. Transition to higher level qualification – stepping stone in the field of education
3. Wider access to high level qualification – alternative pathway to other qualifications

For the student first and foremost it is about employment, either as part of a job for example an apprentice or trainee, to get the first job, or to move onto another job. A secondary consideration is transitioning to a higher qualification. So for the student what is quality provision it is about ensuring they can meet the number one purpose i.e. gaining and or keeping their employment.

In term of quality the feedback loop on whether the service was a quality one is imprecise, was this provider better quality than that one, it is hard to judge. Did the student get work? That is a quick measure of quality. For the student who has limited opportunity to use their entitlement, and once they have “spent” this are not then in a position to “purchase” the same qualification from a more
reputable provider. Research from the US indicates that **providers with better prestige that cost more, doesn’t actually make much difference in the employment and long term earnings of the student.**

So to the question of what resources, ie what are the inputs to be considered in providing that education service, first and fore most it is the Lecturer/Trainer who interacts with the student, and then front line services, counselling, call centres, and web sites. Of lesser consideration is the physical infrastructure, although this does affect the quality of the experience.

So how does a provider provide quality when resources are scare? How does LEAN thinking apply to this service? LEAN is about the **smart, effective, productive use of resources.** It is about reducing the inefficiency, double handling, time wasting, streamlining the service. Can this be applied to the provision of a complex human service? Yes of course it can.

Firstly we need to map the value for the customer – are you providing a service or services, i.e. in marketing parlance **at the multiple touch points does each one add value?** Or it a sacred cow, “we have always done this”, does it really matter to the student or the employer or to the government?

So put yourself in the position of the student? You have decided you need a qualification for the job you have or the next one. What is on offer, where can I do this, or how else can I do this, what will it cost me, when can I start, what will I be studying, who is the lecturer? Is this information all in one location? How quickly can they find this out, from the web site, call centre, campus, or lecturer? When they decide, how quickly and easily can they enrol and pay their money, can they do this by instalments? Can they access content and online material straight away? If fact can this all be accessed for free, and they only pay for the assessment service?

In short hand they want **just enough, just in time and just for me.** Does price matter? Yes it does particularly if they need to pay before they access a service. Does it matter if payment is deferred, some evidence points to the overall cost **mattering much less** if it can be deferred. Using the evidence around credit cards, which is essentially payment deferred. The customer will spend on average twice as much if it can be deferred and only half as much if payment or cash is required right now. The thinking for some students in relation to VET/HE income contingent loans is that it is not my problem, well not right now.

Are we actually over servicing, and providing a “rolls royce, oysters and champagne service”, when a “beer and pie floater” will suffice i.e. **a means to an end.** After all the huge increase in market share by private providers means that the customer is voting with their feet, it is foolish to think that all these students are being manipulated. Most are in fact **making a conscious decision.** Price is a factor, flexibility, speed of service, i.e. customer service. Many are choosing to stay with TAFE despite poor and inefficient service. The inertia to switch to another provider is considerable, however once they do; moving them back is almost as hard. Stop fooling yourselves if you think your students love TAFE for itself, they don’t. **TAFE and another provider is a means to end,** so start thinking about what you will stop doing and start thinking about what you will do to add value for the student. Service, responsiveness, engaged relevant teaching, value for money.
What is LEAN? The traditional thinking on LEAN has focussed on the following:

1. **Identify Customers and Specify Value** – who is paying for the service, what do they actually want? Who makes the actual payment, the student, the family, the employer, the government, the enterprise? In term for that payment, what do they actually want in return?

2. **Identify and Map the Value Stream** – This represents the end-to-end process that delivers the value to the customer. What your staff and your organisation actually do for them? This will vary for each type of customer. Is your online enrolment system a nightmare for students? You are either serving the customer, or serving some-one who is. How far removed is the majority of your staff from the customer?

3. **Create Flow by Eliminating Waste** – What is your organisation doing that doesn’t provide a service to one of the types of customers you have identified? Just for argument sake how many courses/products make up 80% of your business? Which courses have had less than 20 for the last 2 years? Think what it takes to develop and maintain that subject/unit. Why do you still have those subjects on your books?

4. **Respond to Customer Pull** – Provide what your customer wants when the customer wants it.

5. **Pursue Perfection** – Aim for perfection, and you might just get there.

More recent thinking on LEAN by Professor Peter Hines from S A Partners expands the 5 principles to the 8 Ps.

1. **Purpose** – Why are we doing what we do?
2. **Process** – improved customer service and waste reduction
3. **People** – leadership, fit for purpose, interaction to suit the time.
4. **Pull** – problems addressed by the teams responsible, with training provided at level required – actively promote those who know the problem to own the solution.
5. **Prevention** – continuous improvement using a variety of techniques.
6. **Partnering** – high performing supply chain – who else makes a difference in your product, are they better at it than your staff, well then contract them to do the service.
7. **Planet** – responding to customer and society needs.
8. **Perfection** – best possible position - aim to be the best at what you do.

The worldwide trend is to commodification of education services – you can fight against it, and your organisation will wither and die, or you can maximise the value from your resources to serve the customer.

Finally in closing, a personal reflection, I come from a long line of farmers. Broad acre farmers traditionally needed to understand and be able to train horses in order to be a large scale farmer, my grandfather was a champion horse trainer and very talented driver. However in the mid-1940s horses were replaced by tractors, so my father became a mechanic so he could be a better farmer, so did my older brother. But my younger brother did an agricultural course and went straight into farming, meaning he had no formal mechanical qualification.
The local TAFE a couple of years ago had a skills voucher system at Certificate 2 level; I encouraged him to take advantage of the scheme. But never got the service he needed to have his 20 years of experience running a farm, and then a successful hydraulic and engineering business recognised. They wouldn’t return his calls, the lecturer was somewhere else, or on leave, he needed to complete pointless paperwork etc. It when on for months!!

Finally he paid a QLD provider for recognition, not for a Certificate 2 or Certificate 3, but for a Certificate 4. He is currently working off shore, on an undersea drilling rig out of Singapore, earning the kind of money that many dream about.

The qualification was a means to an end.