## *The Quality debate in Lifelong Learning: what are we measuring and for whom? An examination of a model developed to engage stakeholders, including learners, in quality management.*

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### *Introduction*

In recent years interest quality management in lifelong learning has developed as a key issue in the delivery of lifelong learning. This renewed interest in quality arises on the one hand from the need to increase competitiveness in a global economy and on the other from the need to demonstrate accountability in public services and ability to achieve results. The relative importance of quality is demonstrated by the place it is given in policy documents. At the European level, the *European Commission's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2001, p28)* recommended the development of indicators to benchmark quality of provision throughout Europe. A subsequent report entitled *Quality Indicators of Lifelong Learning (E.C. 2002),* which represents the work of representatives from thirty-five European countries, the OECD and UNESCO, has outlined specific quantitative and qualitative data which might be used as indicators to evaluate, promote and support planning in the field of lifelong learning. The report reflects the breadth and complexity of the lifelong learning process itself. It comments:

*'the need to set up mechanisms for quality assurance, evaluation and monitoring in order to ensure constant progression towards quality improvement with a view to striving for excellence on an ongoing basis.'* (E.C. 2002, p5)

The emergence of quality as a key issue in education has also led to the development of a plethora of custodians legitimised by policies that are handed down from politicians, policy-makers, administrators and heads of institutions to teachers, learning support staff, learners etc. In a short space of time, a quality industry has grown up creating an ever increasing bureaucratic load on those responsible for the actual delivery of education and training.

While quality may be seen as an important issue by many, not everyone has welcomed its development. Some critics have described it as the 'flavour of the decade' a 'fashion', and a 'bandwagon.' One of the reasons why the current focus on quality has not always been greeted with enthusiasm has been its failure to take account of the competing needs and desires of different stakeholders in the development of approaches to measuring quality. Middle managers, teachers, learners and others with an interest in the organisation often want to contribute to the improvement of the quality of provision, but too often decisions about improvement lie outside their control.

In this article, the relevance and importance of involving the stakeholders from the area of practice in quality management is examined and the wider benefits that may accrue from wider ownership of quality within organisations is explored. The article draws on experience gained from involving stakeholders in the development and implementation a quality model in the adult basic education sector (ABE).The article first examines the meaning of quality and its relation to lifelong learning

## *The quest for quality*

Quality is not a new subject in education and all those concerned about quality, including policy makers, managers and teachers, have for a very long time sought ways of improving the quality of educational provision.  In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the quality debate and new questions about how things are done and why have been raised.

The Bologna declaration (1999) noted the need to promote European cooperation on quality assurance and to develop compatible criteria and methodologies. The European Report on Quality Indicators of Lifelong Learning (2002, p5 ) stated that the quality of education is a central issue in European cooperation (article 149 of the EC Treaty) and that the quality of education, training and ultimately lifelong learning is one of the main priorities of the European Union action programmes.

A fundamental issue in the quality debate is finding agreement on what we are trying to measure. While many have an instinctive understanding of what quality means, it is often difficult to agree a common understanding.

Several other terms are used interchangeably to refer to '*quality*'. The term '*assessment'* is perhaps the most commonly used term and can be applied to either a  teaching programme, an institutions or policy. Concepts such as '*evaluation'* and '*review'* have also been used in a similar generic way.

The use of the term 'quality' in education is fairly recent and when used, it is often vague and even inconsistent. While a substantial amount has been written about quality, there is a comparatively small amount of the literature that is specifically focused on adult education and the needs of lifelong learners. Jarvis (1995, p226) noted:

*'whilst the language of quality is appearing in adult and continuing education, the definition of the concept is much more problematic.'*

Quality in lifelong learning can be viewed in many different ways. It can be considered at policy, institutional or learning process level and can examine educational, management or administrative issues. It can be examined internally or externally.  The aims and purpose of any quality assessment may well determine what is examined and what is not.

Schwandt (2000, p553) saw evaluation as one way of measuring quality. He defined evaluation as: *'the act of interpreting the value (merit worth,*

*significance) of some activity, object, decision, program, policy, idea.'* He noted that *evaluation* can be special knowledge delivered by an impartial, third party expert or action-oriented self-understanding.

*'the expert is thought to stand in an impartial, unbiased and objective (and hence 'disengaged') relationship vis-à-vis that which he or she evaluates. The experts' judgement is accepted because it is said to rest on scientific objectivity.'*
Schwandt (2000, p553).

The process of measuring quality is seen here as a special kind of expertise which can be undertaken by a specialist who can assess the value of a programme or policy. The expert's judgement is accepted because it is said to rest on scientific objectivity. In producing the new knowledge, the expert adheres to specific procedures or rules that are approved by communities or experts or specialists. The new knowledge conforms to some kind of moral or political demand for impartiality which are unaffected by the subjective preferences and feelings of those involved in the activity. This kind of knowledge which is produced by a third party, is often thought to be more independent, impartial and unbiased in interpreting the merit, worth or significance of the programme or policy; and can then be used to bring about improvement.

Conceiving of evaluation as a *practice of experts* who render objectively independent appraisals about the value of some object is one way of interpreting evaluation. Another way of thinking about quality is to see it as a way of improving accountability, of facilitating development and generating new knowledge through steps or phases in the expert's work. The expert can engage in activities which examine how things are currently working – for example, through gathering information from interviews and questionnaires with particular groups. Here critical reflection on what works best is left to a range of experts involved in the process. However, a different model - the action-orientated self-understanding approach to improvement, brings together all those involved in the process to decide the value, significance or worth of something. For example, tutors and learners might come together to examine the usefulness of learning resources to determine whether the resources available in a learning centre are actually useful and if not why not. This view of evaluation contrasts sharply with the view of evaluation as special knowledge discovered by an impartial third party expert.

The recent emphasis on the quality debate has led to the development of many different approaches to its assessment and a number of models have emerged. Indeed one of the objectives of the EQUIPE project network was to try and bring together information about various models and approaches. There is no one definition, method or tool for measurement. One disadvantage is that in a relatively short space of time, a quality industry has grown up in some countries, creating an increasing, bureaucratic load on those responsible for the delivery of lifelong learning. A question which arises is whether an approach which avoids a heavy bureaucratic approach can be developed and can also demonstrate rigour in its processes and procedures.

This article seeks to address that question and offer 'a stakeholder's model of quality management'.

### *Key factors in measuring quality.*

What then are the factors that might make assessing quality in lifelong learning different to that of the rest of the university?

*An EU funded Socrates project, the Equal Project (2000)* which set out to examine quality in adult education, highlighted differences in lifelong learning practices which must be taken into account in managing quality. The report referred to '*relevance of applying knowledge*' as the most important factor in meeting the needs of mature learners (2000, p11). This is an important issue as it impacts on questions about course organisation, course structure, teaching and assessment methods and the relationship between the university and the outside world. For example, particular teaching methods that acknowledge the past experience and adulthood of the learner must be employed and appropriate educational guidance must be provided to take account of the needs of adult learners. The report also argued that because professional and community problems present themselves as holistic problems that cannot be solved through a single or a multi-disciplinary approach since that would provide fragmented and unconnected solutions (2000, p11), the curriculum for lifelong learning requires an '*interdisciplinary approach*' often related to the workplace, and which sometimes take place in the work environment. This means that courses must start from and be related to '*real life experiences*' rather than only abstract theories. The report concluded:

*'The advent of part-time students requires a drastic overhaul of administrative and teaching organisation, involving modularisation, evening courses, individualised studies, credit accumulation, accreditation of prior educational learning, and so on.' (2000 p12)*

Furthermore, the arrival of new technologies and distance learning means that lifelong learning is no longer tied to one site and the pattern and timing of learning can be organised to suit the particular needs of adult learners. There are many other questions that might be asked about issues such as the marketing and administration of courses, appointment and training of staff, a team approach to curriculum development and delivery, and so on.

The fact that learning is for customers, including not only students but employers, other representative and funding bodies, and often several stakeholders simultaneously, means that the university can no longer maintain a monopoly control over the management of the quality of learning.

The report went on to point out:

*'knowledge is thus situated halfway between the university and the outside entity and is characterised by a continuous endeavour to transform acquired knowledge into practice.' ( 2000, p12)*

Against the background of an increasingly demanding professional environment, lifelong learning departments in universities must increasingly agree qualifications with other stakeholders such as the professional bodies, and must work closely with external and social partners in the validation of qualifications. This often presents different challenges to those posed in the rest of the university, where approaches to quality management are largely within distinctive academic subjects and within the academic staff community, and where teaching and managerial approaches have been developed for learners with very different needs. The *EQUAL Report* noted that these differences in university lifelong learning are often ignored in quality assessment procedures:

'*in practice continuing education is usually treated in the same way as the rest of the university. However it also has specific and different features which should not be ignored in the management of quality.*' (2000, p6)

### Stakeholders and quality management

There may be no shortage of models for quality management, but what is less clear is the contested nature of quality and the involvement of stakeholders in the process. An approach that puts the consumer or learner at the heart of the decision making process, in partnership with other stakeholders has not been central to approaches to quality management. *Mcken* (in *Lomax 1996)* argued that there is a need for ownership of the monitoring and evaluation process by all those involved. A *stakeholder approach* to managing quality in lifelong learning where quality is viewed as a vehicle for improvement involving everyone through a collaborative process, may have much to commend itself.

### A stakeholder's  model

One example of a quality model in lifelong learning which involves stakeholders in quality management can be found in the adult basic education (ABE) sector and has lessons for the university community. The model was first developed as a result of a  European Socrates project  involving  partners from Belgium, England, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The project developed and piloted  the stakeholder  model over a two year period (1998-2000). Since then it has been adopted by the *National Adult Literacy Agency* and  embedded in practice  throughout  Ireland. In a similar way, the model has been used to inform practice in the other participating countries.

The model was examined and discussed by Donaghey and Mark  (2001) in a project report '*Towards a Quality framework for Adult Basic Education'* where they outlined  two stages involved in the development process,  and in the associated user guide  '*Evolving Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education'.*  In a subsequent report, O'Riordan and  Donohoe (2002) outlined the steps necessary for practitioners to implement quality using the stakeholder model.

The framework emerged from action research involving a wide range of stakeholders. In the first year, a quality framework was developed and in the second year this was piloted before embedding it in wider practice. What has emerged is a framework to guide and monitor quality standards through a process of research, consultation and testing.


*The development of the framework ( Stage 1)*

The first stage of the project involved discussions with a range of stakeholders in order to identify the ingredients that might lead to the construction of a quality framework.  Extensive consultations were carried out through meetings and through talking to local groups of tutors and learners.  Many different groups, including representatives from both the formal and non-formal sector, were invited to a series of meetings in each of the four participating countries. These meetings included those with responsibility for developing  policy, for the inspection and strategic management of quality, and for managing and delivering   provision . The meetings also included representatives from customer and learner groups and from colleges, training providers, and the voluntary and community sector.

The project team set a series of objectives for the first phase of the project. These were:

- To raise awareness amongst a sample group of providers and participants of the need for a rigorous evaluation system appropriate to the needs of the adult learner, and agreed by all the stakeholders

- To establish criteria for quality assessment of adult basic education provision which were in keeping with the principles of good practice

- To develop expertise among participating groups in the development and implementation of good quality standards

and

- To develop a strategy for implementation, which would enhance the quality of provision

Initially invitations were sent to stakeholders inviting them to attend an information meeting. There was no particular incentive to get involved and those who attended were all highly motivated and committed individuals who did so because they wanted to improve the quality of provision. At the first meeting ideas about what stakeholders felt quality might be and how it might be measured, were discussed. The participants were then asked to discuss the same questions with other colleagues in their workplace and to come back to the next meeting and share the information they had gathered. The stakeholders were encouraged to write their ideas down and many of those who could not attend the second meeting, submitted written accounts of their

discussions. Additional meetings to gather more ideas were held in learning centres and these meetings often involved learners.

The different types of priorities noted by various stakeholders indicated divergence and diversity. The managers were often concerned with issues such as financing, the tutors with using appropriate teaching and learning practices, and the learners with the importance of good teacher-tutor relationship. Various types of issues were also highlighted in alternative types of provision. For example, rural providers tended to emphasise the problem of accessing provision while training providers emphasised the need for frameworks to comply with particular forms of assessment imposed by those funding the courses.

A great deal of information about quality was generated from the meetings and as a result a number of 'quality areas' were identified . These quality areas were then produced in the form of statements. Thus, the first ingredients of  a diverse quality framework were identified. The ideas emerging from of each of the participants were then fed into a single framework, which included the views of all those involved  in each of the participating European regions.

A total of five guiding principles and sixteen quality statements relating to the student experience and the management of programmes were extracted from all the information gathered. The guiding principles were the key values underpinning practice and  included issues such as the right to attend provision,  the need for an  ethical code of confidentiality, respect and trust, and the need to respect cultural differences. The student experience elements included issues such as initial guidance, student tutor relationships and approaches to assessment.  Programme management issues included financial resources, marketing and staff training.

The quality statements were all put together into a workbook, the ' *Evolving Quality Framework for Adult Basic Education.'(1999),* which also contained suggestions about how to measure them. The findings from this first phase were presented, discussed and further refined at an international seminar attended by representatives from all of the project partners.

While some issues were found to be specific to certain geographical areas, in general the findings were surprisingly similar in each region. Not all the issues that might have been expected to have been raised were found in the framework, for example, issues about learning how to learn, self-assessment and self-evaluation were all found to be missing from the framework.

Stakeholders had suggested aspects of quality that they saw as important from their own perspective, which did not necessarily include the full picture. This was not perceived as problematic, as the model was designed to be evolving and there was a possibility that other issues could be identified and added to the framework at a later stage.

### *Implementing the framework (Stage 2)*

The next stage of the project was to test the framework but before testing could take place, a method for implementing the framework had to be agreed.
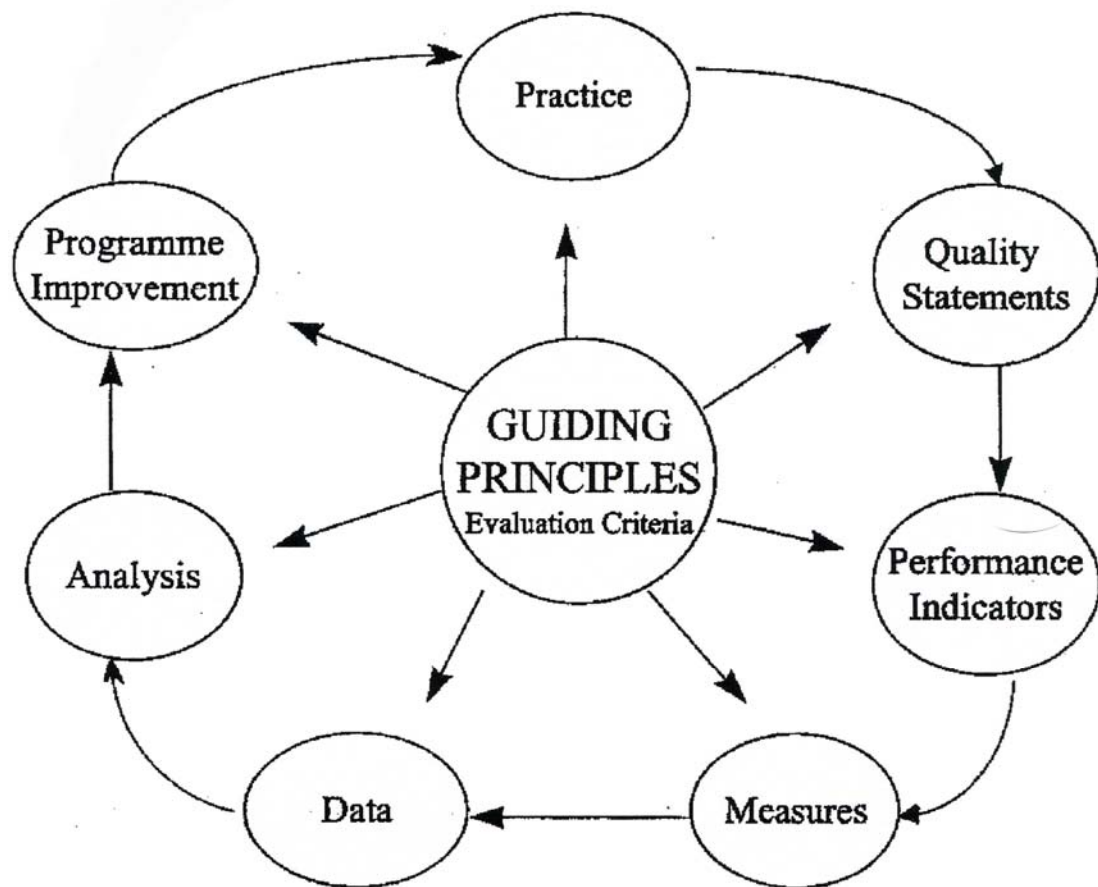
The pilot was designed to be an action research project, through which the quality statements contained in the *workbook* could be tested. The project was designed to be inclusive of everyone's views and tasks or actions would therefore be required in communities of practice to test the assumptions of the framework. This would involve an action research or *reflection-action-reflection* cycle, which would encourage participants to learn from their experience in systematic and rigorous ways.

It would involve ongoing documentation of the evaluation process, gathering evidence for reflection, analysis and future planning. The pilot was designed to be an action research project through which the quality statements contained in a workbook could be implemented in order to test their appropriateness and viability.

A cross section of providers, with some of those who had participated in the first stage of the project and some new partners, were invited to participate in this stage over a five-month period. The process used for implementation of the framework was agreed by the project partners and is described below in *Figure 1.*

Evaluation teams, consisting of representatives from each of the stakeholder groups i.e. learners, tutors and managers, were formed to pilot the framework in each scheme. Initially the teams had to learn how to implement the quality framework. Teams were supported in the initial stages by a facilitator to help them understand the process and the tasks required of them. As well as discussing the quality statements and ways of implementing them, each team was also asked to reflect on processes used and to analyse difficulties encountered. In the pilot, each team selected one or two quality statements to work on. Sometimes these were selected because the team felt they had already achieved a lot in this area while on other occasions, teams chose an area already singled out for improvement. Choosing an area of strength had the advantage of developing confidence and motivation to look at areas of weakness. The actual starting point was seen as irrelevant as in time the whole framework would be reviewed and so both strengths and weaknesses would be identified.

**Figure 1: The Stakeholder Quality Framework:
A Model for Implementation**



At the centre of the process are the *guiding principles*, which inform the whole process. *Performance indicators*, which measure success, are agreed by the local evaluation *teams*. Appropriate measures are then established to monitor these performance indicators. Application of the *performance indicators* and *measures* produce *data*, which can then be analysed, refined and fed back into *programme improvement*. This then leads to an action plan, which can simply be to continue doing something that works well or to plan for specific improvements. These changes are then imbedded in *practice* and as such become the focus of further investigation through re-application of the implementation cycle over a period of time.

The providers were given guidelines on how to use the guiding principles and quality statements for evaluating their own provision. Evaluation criteria are listed in the workbook to help each team to find out if they are delivering a quality service. These can be further developed or disposed of by each team. The job of the evaluation team is to take each statement out of the ideal realm and to interpret it in an operational framework.

For the standards to be piloted, it was important that those involved in implementation had a good understanding of the quality framework and implementation model. A systematic training and support programme was therefore organised to ensure that local evaluation teams had the necessary skills and knowledge for effective implementation.

The evaluation teams followed a step-by-step process as follows:

- Reviewing the existing quality framework and identifying quality statements they wished to adopt as a starting point.

- Deciding how each quality indicator could be measured and what might be acceptable as evidence.

- Collecting data through a variety of means. (e. g. using existing centre records, through discussions with various groups, through surveys, etc.)

- Analysing the data. (e. g. by looking for patterns indicative of good and bad practice).

- Reporting findings to others.

- Using the analysis to confirm good practice and to develop action plans to improve wherever the need for improvement was indicated.

The performance indicators and measures were developed for each quality statement which the providers had chosen to work on. Between meetings individual team members took responsibility for collecting and analysing the data for each of the indicators using agreed measures. The information was then presented and discussed at the next team meeting and an action plan developed to address identified gaps in the scheme's provision.

Sometimes the team's work simply confirmed what they had expected and sometimes they were surprised at what they found. For everyone it was a learning process. The work of the evaluation teams demonstrated that there was keen interest, motivation and enthusiasm for improving practice. For many, this had been the first time they had had an opportunity to step back from their day-to-day practice and to reflect critically as a team on how their local service operates.

The teams found that the most enjoyable stages of the implementation cycle were the collection and analysis of evidence. The use of the concrete rather than abstract indicators and measures offered an opportunity for more genuine involvement and brought much satisfaction. It provided motivation, providing an opportunity to discuss similar problems and challenges with others both inside and outside their area of practice.

On the other hand, some teams found the concepts difficult to grasp and the implementation cycle was consequently seen as a daunting experience.

Some found the process cumbersome and lengthy. For example, participants tended to want to move to programme improvement straight after developing measures and sometimes even after the development of performance indicators. Some decided to translate the concepts into a more familiar language.

Evaluation teams working together on a regular basis found the use of the implementation cycle provided them with a method of reflection and analysis that they could gradually integrate into practice. It also enabled them to discuss quality without feeling threatened and to develop collaboration within their own scheme and with other providers.

Learning became evident even within the short time of the project. Evaluation teams began to notice that proof of performance collected for one quality statement had the potential to contribute evidence for another: for example, minutes of meetings often provided evidence for several of the issues explored. Evaluation teams, which were able to meet regularly, and used the cycle routinely, found it a useful systematic method of working with the obvious benefit that each team member understood the other's approach.

A detailed explanation of the whole process is explained by O'Riordan and Donohoe (2002) in the 'Evolving Quality Framework User Guide.'

### Stakeholders Perspectives'

At an evaluation meeting at the end of the pilot the stakeholders reflected on the process and its benefits and drawbacks. An increased understanding of each other's role and responsibilities within the organisation was reported. Managers, tutors and learners felt they understood each other's function better as a result of the dialogue. For example, management had increased appreciation of the delicate and time-consuming nature of many of the tasks that tutors had to carry out and organisers found the opportunity to raise issues about quality of provision together with tutors and learners useful. The tutors indicated that they gained new insights into the need to gather data and to keep records. Evaluation teams reported that issues such as the request for data from managers were more clearly understood. The benefits from teamwork were found to enhance motivation and reduce isolation. It provided a unique opportunity for each stakeholder to reflect on quality issues affecting practice.

Learners also indicated they had derived many benefits from being able to share their experience with the evaluation teams. Benefits cited included learning how to contribute to discussion within a group and improvement in interpersonal and communication skills. Contributing to the quality project provided learner motivation and a greater feeling of involvement in the work of the centre. Learners also better understood the contribution they could make to improving practice.

The project also raised new questions about quality and whose responsibility it was to measure quality. Previously some of the stakeholders had thought quality measurement to be the responsibility of managers, and teachers and

learners had not previously considered their own potential involvement in the process.

The findings revealed that the stakeholder model has the potential to encourage self-assessment in a more inclusive way. The model encouraged the participation of a wide range of interested groups in an open and frank way and enabled organisations to define what quality means for them in their own context by setting and applying their own measures of performance. Participants were less likely to feel they were being measured by others and there was a greater feeling of ownership of the process. The process was found to be just as important as the outcomes. It encouraged participants to engage self-evaluation and in action planning.

The project demonstrated that a focus on quality issues can produce positive elements of change and can encourage critical engagement in practice and a catalyst for change. Stakeholders were all actively engaged in a dialogue about quality and improvements were initiated into the process in a relatively short space of time.  A change of attitude towards quality measurement was also discernible and this was attributed to a more inclusive approach that valued everyone's concerns. Imaginative and innovative ways of measuring quality were found to develop from teamwork involving different interest groups.  Stakeholders were able to work together to bring about short and long-term improvements, to discuss the nature and purpose of quality and to bring issues and concerns to the forefront of the educational debate. The need to understand processes that were complex and sometimes contradictory was recognised, and the evolving nature of quality was acknowledged.

The pilot also revealed some limitations. In particular, the framework developed was not complete and a number of quality issues which one might expect to be included in a framework were found to be missing e.g. self-assessment and self-evaluation measures.  The pilot also revealed that a lot of time was needed to for understanding and reflection. To be useful, the framework would require ongoing training and support for those involved. While the framework had the potential to deliver improvements in  standards and efficiency, over the longer term it would require input of resources to ensure that this could be achieved.

In summary, comments from stakeholders indicated that the quality framework had provided a new and innovative way for measuring quality.  It resulted in stakeholders having a much better understanding of each other's roles, which would ultimately facilitate better working relationships and improvement in the quality of provision.

In the final project report Doyle (2001) writing for the National Adult Literacy Agency noted that the Socrates project had  provided for :

*'a continuous improvement process which creates a learning culture within an organisation - not only are learners learning, and teachers developing their*

*skills, but the organisation as a whole is learning from the collective experience.'* (2000, p14)

She concluded that the framework and the results from its implementation:

*' recognises achievements and celebrates good practice… The quality improvement process generates wider awareness of quality issues and commitment to improvement. The dialogue, evidence-gathering, review and action steps can promote a culture change.'* (2001, p15)

Views about quality are too often formulated by policy makers and implemented using a top-down approach. Our understanding of quality has too often been influenced by the kind of measurements that the powerful groups want to attach to the 'value' or 'worth' of programmes. Politicians and bureaucrats want hard data on issues such as numbers involved in the programme, qualifications obtained and unit costs. These are linked to improving economic performance. Those whose job it is to define the curriculum also have traditionally defined participation issues by setting objectives or outcomes. The problem is that these do not take account of the perceived needs of communities of practice nor the learners themselves in defining quality and its measurement. Indeed many other groups are left out of the decision making process. Such an approach is therefore flawed as it does not take account of democratic processes that allow for the grassroots to influence philosophical and ethical viewpoints and pedagogic considerations. In such circumstances the value judgements of dominant groups continue to influence what constitutes quality continue to influence what is measured and result in a *sameness* of provision, which cannot acknowledge the richness and diversity of different starting points.

In the stakeholder model described here, the view of each interest group is acknowledged as equally valid. A quality model constructed by a dominant group gives way to a more inclusive model, which acknowledges the right of others to have their voice heard and reflects the different views expressed. It provided a challenge to the top-down model based on the view that standards must be uniform or that bureaucrats should be the custodians of quality. It provided a challenge to dominant groups arguing for a need for inclusive dialogue recognising the need to include the views of other stakeholders such as teachers, learners or community representatives who can often bring different concerns to the discussion.

Adult learners participating in a learning programme do so for a variety of reasons. An inclusive model offers the opportunity to take account of all of these issues. The need to take account of customer or learner needs is important because many adults do not want to join provision that is seen as inappropriate or irrelevant. Learners want to engage in learning relevant to their everyday lives.

The quality framework described above could be described as a bottom- up model for assessing the quality of provision. The involvement of stakeholders in the design of a quality framework is just a first stage towards developing a

more inclusive quality framework acceptable to all. While the above framework has brought together many different groups of people in pursuit of improving quality and in developing tools for measurement, much work still needs to be done to link stakeholder goals with external goals and in determining common standards across provision.  Such an approach must also be developed in such a way as not to undermine local involvement. If the participatory research approach is to take hold, it implies a change of relationship in the field and a commitment from policy-makers to the principle of mutual accountability which acknowledges that information flow is both ways and from the bottom up as well as the top down. The approach described is grounded in participatory evaluation and is based on practices which acknowledge the contribution that the practitioner, learner and other interested groups can make in the field of literacy towards the development of innovative practices and improving quality and participation.  It provides challenges to the traditional methodologies we have used to gather information, and from which we have developed our ideas.

### *Conclusions*

What constitutes a quality service has been, and will continue to be, an issue for debate amongst politicians, professionals and the public. There are many questions unanswered about how quality should be assessed and who should do it: by using quantitative performance standards, by qualitative measures, by involving stakeholders and so on.  Armstrong noted (2000, p4) that the idea that there can be global agreement on definitions of quality is mistaken.  He argued that definitions are invariably situated in a context, which involves a range of people including the learner.  Perhaps we need to look not to an objective, codified set of rules, but to keep in mind that our understanding of quality is constantly changing and that the work of quality improvement is in one sense a collection of choices which can be constantly updated and changed. A commitment to achieving quality through constant negotiation with all those who have an interest in its improvement may therefore be the best way to ensure the ongoing success of lifelong learning in universities.

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