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|  | The Quality Movement in the Maldives:  A Country Status Report  *Hassan Hameed & Hussain Haleem*  Maldives College of Higher Education |

**Introduction**

It would be appropriate to begin our discussion of the quality movement in the Maldives in the context our country, its size, geography and its level of development and industrialization. This context affects the quality movement in any country for the requirement for quality and the public demand for it arise with factors that are related to the characteristics of the country.

Maldives is one of the least developed countries (LDC) in the world with a geography that would not be the envy of any. The small land mass of about 290 square kilometres is dispersed in small islets in a stretch of deep ocean that is over 900 kilometres long and 200 kilometres wide. There are some 1200 islands some of which are under water during high tide. No island is more than 4 feet or 1.2 metres above the sea. There are no mountains or rivers. The people of the islands eke out a bare existence from the sea. The main industry is based on fish, as is the main food, tastes, national icons and culture. In fact, Maldivians think of themselves as “sons of the seas and daughters of the waves.” for 99.9% of their territory is the sea.

The tropical small islands surrounded by shallow emerald lagoons with lush vegetation are magical to be in — for a while. And this beauty has spawned a thriving resort industry targeted at the wealthy Europeans. Tourism is the major foreign currency earner.

**Quality Movement in the Industry**

The Quality Movement has a history associated with industry and exports. For example, the Japanese quality movement began in 1946 following the end of the Second World War and with the revival of the Japanese Industry. The initial tasks involved the education of the industry executives in quality circles, audit and management principles. The widespread ISO 9000 certification of Japanese industry was forced when it became a requirement for exports to Europe (Bolton, et. al., 1995). The association between industry and quality movement is further illustrated by the Singapore experience. The concept of quality management was first incorporated in the industry by a Japanese tyre manufacturing Company (Bridgestone) in 1973 (Singapore Standards, Productivity and Innovation Board, 2002).

One of the characteristics of developing countries is the extent of industrialization and the consequent low levels of exports. It is, therefore, not surprising that Maldives exposure to international quality control regimes are but at infancy. There are, however, exports of processed fish to the South and South East Asia and to Europe. Only one factory processes canned fish for European market. As European markets require ISO 9000 certification, the factory is certified. This is the only ISO 9000-certified company in the Maldives at present. There are no ISO-affiliated or recognized certification authorities in the Maldives.

There are dozens of tourist resorts in the Maldives. Many of them are operated by international hotel chains and quality is a key issue in these resorts. Many resorts depend on repeat visitors. In these circumstances, and due to the large number of competing destinations for holidays and other resorts, quality is a fundamental concern of the resorts. While none of the resorts are ISO-certified, the elements of quality management are all present: customer focus, leadership, staff involvement, process and system based management, facts-based decision making, continual improvement, etc. While ISO-certification is certainly possible for these resorts, none has pursued it: perhaps, there are more profound assurances of quality. ISO certification is not as common in the hospitality industry. As many resorts cut out the middleman (travel agents, etc.) and go for Internet based bookings, it is possible to interrogate quality aspects of a resort directly by the clientele. Standards and scope of services are often denoted by other means, such as stars.

**Quality Movement in Training**

It is in the sphere of training that major strides in quality have been effected in the Maldives. The quality movement is driven by two major developments. One is the shift of university education from an elite system to a mass system with very high participation rates. This is a global phenomenon driven by the so called “knowledge society” requirements. This shift has also made higher education a global commodity with volumes of trade counted in billions. The shift is also accompanied by an erosion of quality of higher education with some overseas universities awarding degrees and certificates of dubious quality— a direct “consequence” of meeting customer needs.

The arrival of these “graduates” causes many issues for the home country. No longer are the employers willing to recognize the education and training of an individual on the basis of a certificate. Problems become complicated when overseas and local parties link together and launch training programmes. Their quality may not be known until completion of the programmes. It was imperative that the government steps in to regulate the provision of education and training to safeguard public interests.

The response of the government was to create the Maldives Accreditation Board. Degrees and diplomas became “protected” terms which cannot be awarded unless the courses have been approved by the Board. Quality was controlled at all levels: in selection of students, course delivery, teaching and learning methods, management, etc. Overseas qualifications are never accepted on face value without recourse to scrutiny of entry qualifications, duration and other details.

Another development which impacted quality assurance in training was the requirement of some international bodies to have external quality certification for training providers. As a case in point, one may cite the convention called The Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) of the International Maritime Organization as amended in 1995. This is an international agreement which governs the training and certification of seafarers for merchant shipping. All seafarers, from 2001 have to be trained in an institution which is quality certified externally preferably to an international level. Many training centres have gone for American Bureau of Shipping, DNV, Lloyds or ISO 9000 quality standard. STCW forced all training centres to obtain quality standards as the case was with firms interested in exporting to Europe. The College also operates a Centre for maritime training.

**Quality Movement in Higher Education**

The main state-funded provider of post secondary education in the Maldives is the Maldives College of Higher Education. There are no universities or other Colleges. Although the College runs along autonomous lines, its programmes are subject to accreditation by the Maldives Accreditation Board.

Quality assurance in the College takes place at many levels. Assurance is important because unlike a manufactured product, it is not possible to reject or recall a graduate once s/he has graduated and are found to be wanting in certain areas. Therefore, we ensure that that the processes and procedures are in place to *guarantee* that graduates meet the required standards and that these are almost foolproof and have fail-safe checks. The quality processes and procedures may include impeccable course design, targeted staff development, quality facilities, use of feedback from surveys of students and employers, and so on. It is a cyclic process in which continuous quality improvement is sought in all areas where quality is important. These may include: (a) course design, (b) teaching and learning, (c) assessment, (d) facilities, (e) graduate feedback, (f) employer feedback and quality audits of faculties. Most decision making involves committees of members with personal stakes in the matters decided.

As an example, consider the development of a unit of study in a course. Once the need has been identified, the objectives of the unit are written and a brief outline of the content is drawn. This is usually done by a committee of experts. Then the unit is written in detail with the objectives for each lecture/session, the assessment, content, resources required, pre-requisites, and references. Once the unit is developed it is blind-reviewed by two subject matter experts. The unit may be changed as a result of this review. The unit is then sent to the Academic Board for review which independently considers the need of the unit in the overall purpose of the College. The Board may return it for review. If the Board is satisfied with the quality and the capacity of the College to deliver it, then the unit is submitted to MAB. If approved it is taught as part of a course. Students are provided with the outline of the unit within the first week. Changes to assessment regime cannot be brought without student approval after the first week. The unit is reviewed at end of delivery by the students. Assessment will always include tasks for which verifiable individual effort would count 50%. The course of study involving the unit may be reviewed at end by students and later by employer feedback. Meanwhile, MAB may continue with its external audit of the delivery process and may meet students to discuss matters. The College may also conduct independent audits of faculties called Faculty Reviews focusing on the main areas of strategic focus: teaching and learning, management, etc.

Global approaches to the certification of quality such as ISO 9000 is not used in the College because there is no need for it at the moment. The main clients are generally confident that adequate measures are in place for quality improvement. In many cases, the Government (MAB) accreditation appears to be sufficient for the moment. However, as the client base widens (to overseas students) international quality certification may become a necessity.

REFERNCE: Bolton, R.W., et. al (1995) Electronic Manufacturing and Packaging in Japan. Maryland, USA: Loyola College

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