

HRM Issues in Quality Initiatives for Malaysian Universities

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to provide evidence on the importance of human resource (HR) related factors in total quality management (TQM) implementation. This involves identifying and defining HR-related critical success factors (CSFs) from an exhaustive source of literature reviews on quality initiatives. The 'soft' or HR-related CSFs in the literature review stand as the fundamental issue in building a theoretical framework. Non-scheduled-structured interviews were conducted on seven Malaysian universities involved in ISO9000 certification processes. Results from the qualitative survey suggest the importance of effective communication, visionary leadership, congruent objectives and recognition and motivation as the four most critical HR factors in TQM implementation in the HE context. Practically, quality HRM as suggested in this study is not only the listing of human resource management (HRM) factors, but also to recommend that H-R-related CSFs are the crucial factors that must go right to ensure successful quality initiatives. Quality HRM demands that the management of an organisation consider the factors required to produce excellent performance. The 'soft' aspect is always suggested theoretically to be important to ensure successful TQM implementation. The findings on HR-related CSFs put forward in this research serve as building blocks for the development of a comprehensive conceptual theory in TQM. This study suggests and validates those HR-related CSFs that play crucial roles in successful quality initiatives.

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INTRODUCTION

Generally, a study on TQM implementation can be focused on either 'hardware' (especially the tools and techniques) or 'software' (mainly the human resource aspects) (Wilkinson, 1992). This study is mainly concerned with the 'soft' or people issues, and usually the more qualitative aspects of a TQM programme. It involves HRM policies and activities which are required to generate commitment to quality and the dissemination of management vision and ideology that may reinforce the maxims of quality working cultural change, continuous improvement and customer orientation.

Even though the term 'quality' has broad and subjective meanings, with concepts of high standards, excellence and 'fitness for its purpose', there has always been great relevance and concern about quality in higher education (HE) institutions. In the British Standard 4778, quality management in HE was taken as the totality of features and characteristics of product services (learning process) that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied stakeholders' needs (HEQC, 1996).

Meanwhile, the critical success factors (CSFs) phrase itself indicates the importance of the concept to ensure the success of any particular process or project. From the perspective of decision management, Ferguson and Dickinson (1982) define CSFs as those internal and external factors that must be identified and reckoned with, as they are capable of supporting or threatening the achievement of a company's objectives. In other words, they should be seen as opportunities or threats in the organisation's strategic planning process. Hence, CSFs are the key areas that need to be carefully identified where 'things must go right' for a programme or business to succeed.

HR-RELATED CSFs IN QUALITY INITIATIVES FOR HE

The following discussions will define ten HR-related CSFs that were used in previous research on quality initiatives, mostly in the context of service organisations.

Visionary leadership

The 2003 Education Criteria of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards (MBNQA) define *visionary leadership* as:

“The organisation’s senior leaders who should set directions and create a student-focused, learning-oriented climate, clear and visible values and high expectations, which should balance the needs of all stakeholders.” (NIST,2003)

Top managers carry the primary responsibility for commitment to quality and support efforts necessary to achieve organisational goals and as the architects of change initiatives, who provide a sense of direction for the workers and the organisation, particularly in successful TQM implementation (Crosby, 1979; Garvin, 1983). In TQM implementation, leaders are responsible for developing and communicating the company vision, and then building organization-wide commitment in the people, in order to achieve the specified goals.

Customer- focus orientation

As in other industries, customers are the main element for quality initiatives in HE institutions. It is essential to identify them, along with establishing the processes to determine each of their needs to be satisfied (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996). Gap 5 in the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1991) indicates that it could be a major service deficiency if the organisation fails to identify and provide the right specifications for customer needs. Hence, customer-focused organisations involved in quality initiatives should believe that business operations would be improved by satisfying customers’ needs and requirements.

Effective communication

Effective communication ensures employees’ clear understanding about the TQM programme, and is also useful to overcome barriers to changes leading towards quality improvement. In TQM, communication should happen at all levels, through all aspects of operations (Dale and Cooper, 1993). Furthermore, Sherr et al. (1992) argue that the working culture of most colleges and universities would have to be

transformed through effective communication in training and education, and that it is top management alone which can develop the total quality mindset in people throughout the organization. Thus, in the HE environment, quality communication is indicated within the functions to adapt quality programmes to internal and external customers and to promote a network of cooperation between staff and students.

Congruent objectives

Deming (1986) suggests that congruent objectives in quality management will drive out the fear of uncertainty in people, and is the best way to create a quality environment. Meanwhile, Gaps 2 and 3 in the SERVQUAL model by Parasuraman et al. (1991) explains clearly the effect of a lack of congruent objectives of management on the services provided by employees, in terms of service perception. Nonetheless, the common objectives in TQM are to increase productivity, maximise resource utilisation (or total cost and capacity management), and at the same time, to be sure of customer satisfaction.

Staff selection and deployment

Employee selection is a HRM decision process that is made on the basis of assessment of the suitability of a group of potential individuals who might fill job vacancies (Rees and Doran, 2001) and suggests that, from a TQM perspective, selection processes are designed to identify individuals who possess quality-related competencies. Staffing or staff deployment through the 'rightsizing' and 'ability-job-fit' technique in quality management essentially involves analysing a unit or department's personnel needs based on its long-term quality objectives, and the overall company needs, and finding the combination of permanent and temporary employees with the best skills and competencies to meet those needs.

Competent staff

Woodruffe (1993) defined competencies as the set of behavior patterns that the incumbent needs to bring to the position in order to perform its tasks and functions with competence. Meanwhile, the Carter et al. (2000) findings suggest that there is a need for management staff to have skills and commitment in key strategic

decisions, and that there is a need for employees to be involved in more tactical decisions. Both factors are important to the success of TQM. In order for the employees to perform as excellent a job as expected, they need to have the knowledge, skills and capabilities relevant to the tasks specified, which are critical to provide quality services.

Teamwork spirit

Teamwork in the TQM perspective is seen as where everyone in an organisation is personally managing and continuously improving their own process, and working together in teams to improve their service to customers. Behara and Gundersen (2001) find that TQM practices emphasize teamwork and cross-functional relationships that provide many opportunities for social interaction and social reinforcement. This shows that the spirit of team working is one of the main features of the TQM culture. The Black and Porter (1996) study find teamwork structures to represent efforts made to develop organizational structures in support of quality improvement initiatives. Hence, a quality working culture of teamwork spirit is an important condition for successful TQM implementation.

Rewards and motivation

A reward policy in HRM which involves the selection of a range of rewards to be designed and administered is crucial to the ultimate aim of motivating employees to contribute effectively to a set of organisational missions. Hackman and Wageman (1995) claim that among the evidence they reviewed for the discriminant validity of TQM was the fact that TQM explicitly eschews a number of popular motivational devices, including work redesign, goal setting and performance-contingent rewards. Hence, the studies suggest that organisations must develop formal systems to encourage, track and reward employee involvement to maintain a high level of employee motivation towards excellent performance.

Training and education

Deming (1982) explains that what an organisation needs in TQM implementation is not just good people, but people who are continually improving with training

and education. Oakland and Oakland (1998) claim that training is one of the most important factors for continuous improvement. Saraph et al. (1989) suggested that TQM requires technical and attitudinal knowledge, as well as specific training to ensure employee understanding. Moreover, HR development and management examine the key elements of how HE institutions develop and realise the full potential of their workforce while pursuing the quality and excellent performance objectives.

Innovation and creativity

The MBNQA defines innovation in the 2003 Education Criteria Version (NIST, 2003) as “... *making meaningful change to improve programmes, services, and processes, and create new value for students and stakeholders. It involves the adoption of ideas, processes, technology, or product that is new or new to its proposition.*” In the service quality context, Ziethaml, et al. (1990) suggest that creativity in service design is a form of architecture involved in process, interaction and the evaluation of outputs to ensure customer satisfaction. In the HE context, the innovative idea in designing of teaching systems, course materials and content delivery to students are important interactions in the overall quality learning process.

QUALITY INITIATIVES IN MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITIES

The TQM philosophy and concept have been incorporated in Malaysian public administration agencies since the late 80s. The quality management initiatives in the Malaysian public sector began with its enforcement through Public Administration Development Circular (4) 1991, entitled *Guidelines for Quality Improvements in Public Services*, which provides general guidelines for each head of a public service organisation to prepare strategic planning for quality management and improvements in their agency to create an excellent working culture.

In 1996, a Public Administration Development Circular (2) 1996, entitled *Guidelines for Implementing MS ISO 9000 in the Civil Service*, was made effective, which required at least one department in each government agency to implement quality initiatives towards international accreditation. For public HE institutions, they started the programme :with at least one faculty or academic service

department. One of the main objectives mentioned in the circular, which is relevant to the HE context, is to implement a quality management system that is universal, and based on a standard that is internationally recognised.

Seven Malaysian HE institutions participated in this study. These are the universities that have been involved in various forms of quality initiatives, and all of them have received the ISO9001 :2000 accreditation. Most of the background information on the universities is based on secondary data gathered in the form of published or printed documents and information available in the university websites. However, the main focus would be on the administration of quality policies, programmes and activities in each university.

RESEARCH METHOD

The qualitative research approach permits the researcher to gain in depth and detailed insights into the subjective aspects of complex social and organisational information. In view of this the qualitative research method is most appropriate for the humanistic (or hermeneutic) researcher, in order to gain deeper understanding of a particular research question (Cassell and Symon, 1994). The concept of context in organisational research is one of the most important reasons for choosing the qualitative approach. This means that qualitative research methods focus on exploring, in depth, the richness and significance of individual experiences within the research context.

The interviewing approach employed for this research is called 'focused interview' or 'nonscheduled-structured interview'. It permits the researcher to obtain details of personal reactions, specific emotions, responses relevant to the research context and the like.

There were eight interviews carried out altogether in the seven participating Malaysian public universities, where in one, two separate interviews were conducted to obtain more information. Detailed information on the, interviewees and their involvement in quality initiatives are shown in Table 1. All interviewees are those involved directly in quality initiatives, and who are responsible to ensure the success of the quality programmes. They were managing the resources, particularly the organisational members, to encourage full involvement and commitment to the quality systems.

Table 1 Interviewees and their background

HE institutions	Position in Faculty	Roles in Quality Project
Unit 1	Professor and Dean Associate Professor	Management representative Director of Quality Assurance Unit
Unit 2	Research Officer	Quality project coordinator
Unit 3	Associate Professor and Deputy Dean	Management representative
Unit 4	Deputy Chief Librarian	Management representative
Unit 5	Lecturer	Director of Quality Assurance Unit
Unit 6	Research Officer	Quality project coordinator
Unit 7	Senior Lecturer	Director of Quality Assurance Unit

The Researcher's competency could be developed and demonstrated through the opening of the interview, using appropriate language, questioning and listening skills, behavioural cues, and recording of data (Saunders et al., 1997). The researcher had been working at one of the universities as an administrative officer for 11 years, and as an academician for 7 years. All interviews were tape-recorded, with the permission of the interviewees, and a written record was compiled on the interviewing pro-forma. Time management is important so that the time spent for the interview process is enough to obtain the required data, and not too long as to cause an adverse impact, particularly on the interviewees.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the qualitative survey will be discussed focusing on the perspectives of top management and employees' roles in quality initiatives.

Top Management's Role in Quality Initiatives

The role of the top management is one of the main aspects of quality HRM practices in TQM implementation. Almost all literature on CSFs included and attested to the importance of this factor in TQM implementation. Hence in this study, a specific question was asked in the interview on how this factor applies to the process of quality initiatives in Malaysian universities.

Generally, all of the interviewees strongly agreed that the university management plays a very important role in ensuring successful implementation of any quality initiatives in their universities. In essence, top management made the critical decisions in the process of implementing quality programmes, including determining the quality vision and mission, and setting up specific departmental policies for the administration of quality activities. The facts given were transcribed and organised in a more meaningful manner, and the concepts were interpreted and classified into the relevant HR- related CSFs and quality working climate variables.

Comparative Analysis of Management Roles

Generally there are four common elements of management role to ensure successful quality initiatives in Malaysian universities. The factors as revealed by the interviewees are:

1. Management's strategic decision on the quality initiative, which determines the initial move to take it on, and to incorporate the quality systems into the faculty's daily operations.
2. Management commitment to quality programmes, including sitting on the quality management committee, attending quality training and showing their presence in most of the quality activities.
3. Motivating and persuading staff towards the success of the quality initiative, including moral support, recognition of quality achievements and celebrating task accomplishments.
4. Providing adequate physical and financial support to ensure that the quality programme runs smoothly. The facilities that management should provide include quality administration and documentation office and training programmes.

The interviewees at Uni1, Uni4 and Uni6 had different experiences to relate about the management roles at their faculties. The Dean of a faculty at Uni 1 noted,

“ ... the management decision to empower staff to come up with innovative and creative ideas has had a great impact on the acceptance of the quality programme. The move has brought about continuous change at our faculty, and that has improved our overall performance.”

Meanwhile, the interviewee at Uni4 stated,

“ ...a strict rule was specified by our Quality Council to ensure all employees are involved and participate in the quality programme, including compulsory training on quality systems.”

On the other hand, interviewee at Uni6 noted,

“ ...the quality system was to design a complaint management procedure to specify that every customer complaint should be dealt with by the faculty’s management. This means that the management has to take full responsibility to take corrective action and ensure customer satisfaction.”

The results suggest that visionary leadership is the most important factor to ensure a successful quality initiative. The decision to initiate quality programmes and determine quality policies and vision has to be inspired by the top management. However, effective management roles are strengthened with the support of effective communication skills, incentives and recognitions through rewards and motivation and noticeable presence and support to enhance the teamwork spirit among organisational members. A summary of the results of HR-related CSFs in management roles in quality initiatives mentioned in the survey is shown in Table 2.

Roles of Employees in Quality Initiatives

Employees or the faculty staff is the other aspect of quality HRM practices that this study is focusing on. Generally, most literature supports the concept of the importance of employees in any management activities. Therefore, to explore the idea in the interview survey, the related question posed was the roles of employees in ensuring successful quality initiatives. A total of 29 items were identified as employee roles, which are closely related to the HRM factors in TQM implementation.

Table 2 Summary Results of HR-related CSFs in Management Roles

HR- related CSFs	Number of mentions
1. Visionary leadership	9
2. Effective communication	6
3. Rewards and motivation	6
4. Teamwork spirit	6
5. Innovative product design	3
6. Training education	3
7. Congruent objectives	2

Comparative Analysis of Employee Roles

Even though all interviewees claimed that employees play important roles in ensuring a successful quality initiative, some of them had different views on what the roles are. The employee roles most commonly mentioned by all respondents are:

1. Employees need to have the quality awareness and attitudes required by TQM systems. It helps the quality process, especially in relation to front-line service to minimise customer complaints and ensure customer satisfaction.
2. Interdepartmental cooperation and teamwork spirit to ensure standard service at a quality level.
3. Staff to set own quality targets that comply with, and are complementary to, departmental objectives. Staff must keep in mind that their work performance will be reflected in departmental results.
4. However, interviewees at Unil, Uni3 and Uni7 claimed that employees should give quality suggestions and innovative ideas, as they are more familiar with solving operational problems.

The interviewee of Unil noted,

“... most of the quality procedures documented at the faculty for ISO9000:2000 certification were based on consensus decisions by staff members, and most of the suggestions came from them.”

The interviewee at Uni3 stated,

“ ... by allowing the staff to participate and give improvement suggestions, they are more committed to make sure the systems work, and also it helps to overcome their sceptical views on the quality programme.”

The other elements of employee roles that were mentioned by interviewees at Uni3 and Uni5 are the employee’s duty as the implementer of the quality procedures. The Management Representative of Uni3 noted,

“ ... most of the quality documents prepared at the library are meant for the staff to read, understand, and follow . Therefore, it would be useful if the procedures are simplified and practical to be implemented.”

Meanwhile the interviewee at Uni5 stated,

“... staff have to make sure that the way they work complies with the documented procedure on quality service to avoid customer complaints. After all, that is the requirement of the quality systems.”

A summary of HR-related CSFs mentioned in this survey in relation to employee roles to ensure successful quality initiatives is shown in Table 3. The results show that effective communication is the most important factor for enhancing successful employee roles in the process of encouraging continuous improvement and quality customer service in HE institutions. The basic quality attitude on

Table 3 Summary of HR-related CSFs on employee Roles

HR- related CSFs	Number of mentions
1. Effective communication	8
2. Customer focus orientation	7
3. Congruent objectives	7
4. Staff Competency	4
5. Reward and motivation	3
6. Innovative product design	3
7. Teamwork spirit	1
8. Employee involvement	3

customer-focus orientation is also considered very important, as the quality of service is largely determined by the nature of employee interactions with customers. However, according to Wilkinson. (1992), this factor is also associated with communication, teamwork spirit and motivation, which means that these HR factors are interrelated.

Summary of findings

The results show that the nine HR-related CSFs included in the study were mentioned several times by the respondents. The four most commonly mentioned factors are effective communication, visionary leadership, congruent objectives and recognition and motivation. It may however be necessary to emphasise the other factors, depending on the organisational situation, and the condition of employee-management relationships. Details of the findings are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Summary of HR-related CSFs in TQM Implementation

HR- related CSFs	Number of mentions
1. Effective communication	14
2. Visionary Leadership	9
3. Congruent objectives	9
4. Reward and motivation	9
5. Customer Focus Orientation	7
6. Teamwork spirit	7
7. Innovative product design	6
8. Staff Competency	4
9. Training and education	3

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

In terms of academic significance to researchers, this study makes a contribution to knowledge in the immediate disciplines (HRM and TQM). The findings validate HR-related CSFs in TQM implementation in HE institutions in Malaysia, which can be applied to further research in other service sectors. In practice, this study

might help top management, quality-project managers, quality-assurance managers, HRM managers and employees to understand the importance of quality HRM in quality management in order to achieve performance excellence. HR-related CSFs are the elements that must go right to ensure that employees are clear about the quality mission, establish a quality working culture and are motivated to produce the best results.

CONCLUSION

The theoretical discussions justify nine HR-TQM critical factors, which are relevant to quality initiatives in the HE context. They are visionary leadership, customer focus, effective communication, congruent objectives, staff selection and competencies, teamwork spirit, training and education, recognition and motivation and innovation and creativity. The findings of the qualitative survey suggest that quality effective communication, visionary leadership, congruent objectives and recognition and motivation are the four most important HR-related factors which are critical to ensure successful TQM implementation in the HE context. However, the other factors included in this study might necessarily be considered for a particular condition. For further research, mediating factors in HRM practices such as employee involvement and commitment can be considered to validate integrated HRM-TQM relationships in the process to produce performance excellence. Moreover, this evidence is very useful for more meaningful findings using the triangulation approach, which require empirical results from the quantitative research method.

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