

# Utilizing a Continuous Improvement Philosophy to Improve Learning at the University of the Philippines<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*The search for excellence has been the hallmark of the instruction, research and extension functions of the University of the Philippines since the term of its first president, Dr. Bienvenido Gonzalez. The search for excellence is the philosophy behind Continuous Quality Improvement or CQI. This philosophy is exemplified in the operations of the UP System with its seven constituent campuses in the Philippines. This paper attempts to define the features of the philosophy and present a model for its operationalization in the higher education sector based on the programs of the University of the Philippines, in general, and the UP Open University, in particular.*

## INTRODUCTION

At the very beginning of this paper, let me share with you an open, yet quite embarrassing secret: *In today's world, university faculty cannot remain successful in their academic pursuits unless they are actively engaged in consulting or in the private practice of their profession.*

This secret is out in the open because most successful academics I know cannot do away with their consulting practice. It is also embarrassing because the strict academic traditions of our most revered centers of higher education equate consulting to moonlighting on official time and the compromise of our academic values. Yet, nobody can deny that consulting enriches not only the faculty member, but more so his teaching and his creative output. From experience, I can state unequivocally that my creative output insofar as publications and instructional materials are concerned is directly related to the number of my consulting engagements.

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Having straddled the academe and industry for the past twenty years, I can also state from experience that universities and colleges, particularly those that have enjoyed long academic traditions, are among the organizations that are least likely to adopt total quality management or TQM procedures or systems. I recall an incident four years ago when a representative from a top Philippine quality assurance firm made a presentation to our Chancellor's Advisory Council for a quality management system that would earn our University an ISO 9000 accreditation. Faced with a panel of academics, the presentation did not go well for the salesman. Suffice it to say that after his presentation, the representative felt that he underwent an oral thesis defense and failed.

This is not to say that the academe is against TQM. It merely suggests that industry and the academe worship different gods; or, at best, both worship the same god but in different forms. Allow me to explain this statement.

I refer to universities and colleges who have enjoyed long academic traditions – traditions of academic debate and critical inquiry that, at times, sacrifice efficiency and effectiveness in the name of intellectualism and scholarship. Furthermore, I refer to TQM *systems* and *procedures*, not to TQM *philosophy*, which undoubtedly rests at the core of the argument for intellectualism and scholarship.

## **TQM AND CQI**

Based on the extensive literature on TQM, we define it as a continuous improvement approach employed by management and centered on the needs of our clients. TQM was introduced in the eighties along with other Japanese management inspired concepts such as Theory Z. The concern for continuous improvement has been made more apparent in TQM's latest incarnation as CQI or continuous quality improvement. The University of Iowa defines CQI as an approach to quality management that builds upon traditional quality assurance methods by emphasizing the *organization* and *systems*. It focuses on *process* rather than the *individual*. Furthermore, it recognizes both internal and external *customers*. Lastly, it promotes the need for objective data to analyze and improve processes.<sup>3</sup>

The University of Iowa further states that CQI is a management philosophy, which contends that most things can be improved. This philosophy does not subscribe to the theory that, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." At the core of CQI is serial experimentation (the scientific method) applied to everyday work to meet the needs of those we serve and improve the services we offer.

CQI's relevance to institutions of higher learning goes beyond the mention of the scientific method in its process. At the heart of the CQI philosophy is the

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<sup>3</sup> [www.fpm.iastate.edu/worldclass/cqi.asp](http://www.fpm.iastate.edu/worldclass/cqi.asp)

search for excellence, a search that makes its relevance to the academe absolute.

## **CQI AND THE UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES**

The beginnings of CQI in the University of the Philippines may be traced to the 1920's and 30's when Dr. Bienvenido Maria Gonzalez served as the Dean of the U.P. College of Agriculture in Los Baños. Dean Gonzalez demanded excellence in all things produced by the College, "whether the product was a student, a plant, an animal or a scientific paper." He coaxed the College "to spread deep roots" by ensuring that its products "bear a mark similar to that of sterling in silver." Eventually, the U.P. College of Agriculture became the premier agricultural institution in the region attracting students from Thailand, Viet Nam, Cambodia and other Asian nations. On his part, Dean Gonzalez became the first Filipino president of the University of the Philippines.

This demand for excellence and adherence to a standard similar to that of sterling is the same philosophy behind CQI. Until today, this philosophy is exemplified in the operations of the UP System with its seven constituent campuses in the Philippines.

## **OPERATIONALIZING CQI**

With very few exceptions such as the Asian Institute of Management in Manila, the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, and newer institutions that are not burdened as much by tradition, the features and operationalization of CQI in the academe would differ procedurally and substantively from that of a private business organization. Yes, there have been several attempts by younger, dynamic administrators to institute quality assurance systems in many universities but compliance may be characterized as deficient.

For instance:

- ISO 9001 accreditation becomes less of a priority.
- Workflows and procedures are seldom documented and manualized.
- Targets, particularly those relating to the research and extension functions, are seldom identified.
- Academic freedom, at times, determines the conduct of critical functions such as instruction.
- Systematic and systemic internal audit, monitoring and evaluation procedures are not done sustainably and regularly, and thus cannot be the basis for major decisions.

Yet CQI parallels are easily discernable in day-to-day operations of the academe. What follows is an enumeration of CQI core concepts and their operationalization in the University of the Philippines System.

**Quality is defined as meeting and/or exceeding the expectations of our customers.** The University as a government-owned institution of higher learning does not have “customers” per se. However, it serves three specific sectors: the youth sector; the scientific sector; and the development sector. These three service sectors correspond to the trilogy of functions of the University: instruction; research; and extension.

**Success is achieved through meeting the needs of those we serve.** The meeting or exceeding the expectations of these different sectors is a matter of course for the University of the Philippines System. The University’s survival is dependent on its dynamism. It cannot remain as it was a year ago – teach the same knowledge; arrive at the same research conclusions; extend the same expertise – and survive. It is imperative for the University to outdo itself year after year.

**Most problems are found in processes, not in people. CQI does not seek to blame, but rather to improve processes.** Academic discussions that precede major decisions at all levels of the University are considered necessary adjuncts of collegiality. A collegial body decides on the basis of the widest spectrum of expertise available. It is this same collegial process that is often misunderstood as a futile academic exercise and thus, a waste of time and energy. However, the academe rightly views this as a prerequisite to the search for excellence.

**Unintended variation in processes can lead to unwanted variation in outcomes, and therefore we seek to reduce or eliminate unwanted variation.** The almost rabid adherence to tradition by the older more conservative factions of the faculty is an indication of the concern for unwanted variation in teaching, research and extension outcomes.

**It is possible to achieve continual improvement through small, incremental changes using the scientific method.** The University is in the business of knowledge generation as much as knowledge sharing. One of the primary assumptions in the academe is that knowledge generation is the product of the scientific method. Hence, it follows that continuous improvement in the conduct of its three functions – instruction, research, and extension – is based on knowledge arrived at through sound experimentation and observation. For instance, the improvement of teaching is based primarily on empirical evidence garnered in the classroom.

**Continuous improvement is most effective when it becomes a natural part of the way everyday work is done.** Since the days of Dean Gonzalez, the culture of excellence has permeated all undertakings of the University of the Philippines. So much so that at times it is taken for granted. Yet a University constituent – a faculty member, student or staff – cannot help but

imbibe this culture because it is demanded in his interactions with his colleagues and contemporaries.

## **CQI AND THE U.P. OPEN UNIVERSITY**

The University of the Philippines is made up of seven autonomous constituent campuses, each headed by a Chancellor. The main campus is in Diliman, Quezon City. There is a smaller but older campus in Manila. The College of Agriculture and the College of Forestry and Natural Resources are found in the Los Baños campus. There is also a small but very active campus in Baguio City. In Central Philippines, we find U.P. Visayas. In the Southern part of the country, we find U.P. Mindanao.

I currently teach in the remaining constituent campus, the fifth to be established. The U.P. Open University was not geographically decided since it has centers in all the other constituent campuses while being headquartered in Los Baños.

Early on, the Philippine Commission on Higher Education designated UPOU as the Center of Excellence for Open Education and Distance Learning. It was also awarded the distinction of being the eLearning Competency Center of the Philippines by the Commission on Information and Communication Technology. As expected, continuous quality improvement remains a primary concern. A few examples may be found in the following:

**Staffing.** Strict standards on hiring and the granting of tenure are meticulously followed. An Academic Personnel Board screens all recommendees of the different Faculties.

**Production of Instructional Materials.** Each material produced by the University undergoes a process that is implemented by a Quality Circle of writers, instructional designers, editors and reviewers.

**Online Learning.** In recent years, several questions regarding the quality of online learning have been forwarded. UPOU is in the best position to address these questions having had the most extensive experience in eLearning in the entire Southeast Asian region.

## **CONCLUSION**

Total quality management or continuous quality improvement may be difficult to discern in the academe. Yet, it permeates academic life since the search for excellence is inherent in the academic tradition. TQM and CQI may come in different forms in institutions of higher learning.