

REPORT FROM CONSUMER FOCUS GROUPS ON THE QUALITY STRATEGY

Summary

As part of the consultation process for the new quality assurance system targeted consumer focus groups were held in each state and territory. They were run by contracted consultants on the Department's behalf.

Overall, the feedback from these consultations was positive, with consumers expressing strong support for the new system and a belief its implementation would result in better service. They also provided useful suggestions for improvements. Quite clearly, consumers appreciate their high level of involvement in the certification process.

In short, there was very strong support for award-based conditions -- in particular award wages -- being an essential feature of the quality strategy. Consumers backed the proposal that staff qualifications and training receive much greater attention and called for the strategy to take into account cultural difference. Indeed, many suggestions were received on this issue.

Consumers were overwhelmingly in favour of the proposed independent complaint mechanism, calling for it to be up and running as soon as possible.

The information gathered in the focus groups will be used by the Working Party and JAS-ANZ technical committee in determining improvements to the quality strategy before its implementation.

Methodology

The consultants attended a workshop in Sydney on March 27 and 28, 2001 at which they were briefed about the proposed quality strategy in order to develop focus group formats and reporting requirements. All parties agreed the consultations should seek answers to specific issues including:

- the amount of support required by consumers in QA system (personal/practical);
- any barriers preventing participation;
- suggested improvements to the QA system;
- suggested improvements of standards, key performance indicators and evidence questions;
- the preferred ways of being informed about the quality strategy;
- the necessary characteristics of technical experts; and
- the feedback required by consumers after consultations are completed.

It was also agreed that the consultants would report on:

- other issues that were raised consistently;
- other important issues raised by individual consumers during sessions, and;
- their informal assessment as to whether consumers were pleased with quality strategy.

The consultants who were contracted to undertake the consultation were:

Western Australia	E-Qual
South Australia	Beyond Current Boundaries
Victoria	Active Learning in Disabilities
Tasmania	Speak Out
New South Wales	PWD
Queensland	Directions Australia
Northern Territory	Directions Australia
Australian Capital Territory	Didactic Enterprises

In total 441 consumers were consulted across Australia in 50 focus groups. The following table details the locations and number of people consulted:

State	Location (number of sessions held in location if more than one held)	Consumers	Support worker/family members/staff members (where reported)
Western Australia	Perth City	6	3
	Mt Lawley (2)	12	8
	Fremantle	4	4
	Bunbury	7	2
	Broome (2)	4	9
South Australia	Marion, Adelaide city, Port Adelaide	11	
Victoria	Melbourne	7	
	Morwell	20	
	Shepparton	8	
	Geelong	20	
	Melbourne work site	80	
Tasmania	Hobart (2)	11	4
	North (3)	22	5
	North West (2)	9	2
New South Wales	Sydney (4)	27	
	Newcastle (3)	24	
	Wollongong	8	
	Gosford	9	
	Dubbo	10	
	Lismore	8	
	Moree	13	
	Broken Hill	6	
Queensland	Brisbane south (4)	30	2
	Brisbane north (2)	12	1
	Stanthorpe	7	
	Emerald	8	1
	Townsville	4	1
Northern Territory	Darwin	9	
	Alice Springs (2)	15	
	Tiwi islands	13	
Australian Capital Territory	Canberra city (2)	17	1
TOTALS	50	441	43

Findings

Following is a summary of the most significant and consistent findings from the consultants' report.

Support required by consumers in QA system (personal/practical)

Consumers identified a number of personal and practical supports that would be necessary for them to participate in the quality assurance component of the quality strategy. These supports include:

- information about the audit and auditor in advance of an audit;
- advocacy to prepare for, and participate in, audits;
- the informing of parents/guardians about the quality assurance process (although some consumers disagree with this);
- the development of information material in accessible formats (including community languages) for consumers, not just service providers;
- genuine assurances about confidentiality;
- the guarantee of privacy and safety during interviews;
- a clear welcome by service providers of the consumers' role in the quality assurance process;
- the availability of interpreter services during audits;
- access to good quality, systemic and independent rights-based education and training about the quality assurance system;
- access to long-term self-esteem and assertiveness training;
- enough time for auditors to effectively engage consumers;
- ascertaining consumers' opinions during audits through various methods, including direct interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and a phone-in;
- voluntary participation;
- the availability of attendant care;
- assistive technology such as hearing loops; and
- transport and out-of-pocket expenses.

Any barriers preventing participation

A major barrier to participation as reported by consumers is a lack of confidence or experience. Other barriers are seen as:

- a fear of retribution from service providers;
- a lack of understanding and knowledge;
- the belief that doing your job is more important than attending a meeting;
- a lack of interest;
- a lack of trust in the person doing interviews;
- a lack of confidence, a fear of saying something wrong;
- intimidation;
- the "white fella" way which does not allow for lots of time to get to know people and to share information in the Aboriginal way;
- a lack of incentives to participate (eg payment of travel costs, or trust that what is said will be listened to and acted upon);
- communication difficulties;
- a lack of time; and
- a concern about confidentiality.

Consumers indicated most barriers would be overcome by using an advocate or significant friend as a support person, or by using interpreters such as AUSLAN signers.

Positive comments were received about the amount of consumer representation/integration into the new quality assurance system.

Suggested improvements to the QA system

A significant proportion of consumers indicated that the payment of award (or better) wages was an important indicator of service quality, and that this issue ought to receive particular attention during the quality assurance process. It was also suggested that auditors check to see that other employment conditions and entitlements such as holiday and sick leave, superannuation, long service leave etc were being met.

Clearly, consumers want and expect training and support to participate in the new quality strategy. Other suggestions included:

- recognising the differences resulting from a different cultural background, for example, an understanding of the context in which Central Australia indigenous people live, what is valued and what place employment has in their culture;
- increasing and formalising communication processes between service providers and consumers;
- removing the word certification from the system because it is stigmatising to some consumers;
- placing more value on how the service is seen locally as effective and responsive to a wide range of clients -- and less on written policies and technical paperwork;
- involving consumers in the selection of auditors or giving them the right of veto;
- not allowing service providers to use the same certification body after an audit cycle is completed (although some consumers disputed this);
- changing the length of the audit cycle (some consumer thought it should be longer and others shorter);
- dealing more adequately with preventing and managing discrimination and work place harassment;
- auditing each service site separately;
- giving the consumer the power to decide if the audit team should speak to their employer; and
- ensuring the audit team know more about the reality of providing services in rural and remote locations.

Suggestions for improving the complaint mechanism included:

- recognising that rather than complaining to a service, indigenous consumers tend to complain to family members, the council or community president;
- acknowledging consumers want to be able to speak directly and in person to personnel from the complaint mechanism;
- providing advocacy support to make complaints and appeals;
- making it accessible to people with a wide range of disabilities;
- putting it in place as soon as possible; and
- guaranteeing protection against retribution.

Issues/suggestions for improvement of standards, key performance indicators and evidence questions

Suggested improvements to the Disability Services Standards, Key Performance Indicators and evidence questions included:

- a review of the relevance of some of the Disability Services Standards and their key performance indicators to suit all types of services, for example, a consumer questioned the relevance of participation in Standard 3 as a sign of quality;
- ensuring the Standards overcome problems of services competing for work, and encourage services to work together to secure employment and contracts;
- incorporating cultural sensitivity and competence in all key performance indicators;
- making consumer satisfaction with a service a key performance indicator;
- checking morale of both staff and consumers and the quality of the relationships;
- assessing the degree to which services challenge barriers to the employment of people with disability in the external environment (including physical access, gaps in availability of assistive technology and employer, peer and public attitudes that limit opportunities).

Specific suggestions for each Standard included:

- Standard 1: services should be required to keep a waiting list; to give reasons in writing for a decision not to accept a consumer; and to train staff in interpersonal skills so that the first contact is positive and accepting.
- Standard 2: should ensure staff aim for flexibility in helping consumer to define their strengths; should ensure staff think laterally in suggesting ways to overcome barriers to employment; should ensure staff aim to build consumer esteem. It should also foster an ethos of genuine caring for individuals and evidence could include reviewing (with the consumers' permission) individual plans and work place assessment etc. Some participants thought it particularly important auditor's check that individual plans contain goals the consumer agreed with and wanted fulfilled.
- Standard 3: should ensure staff shortages do not impact on consumers being appropriately informed; that a transfer from full-time to part-time does not necessitate a change in service provider; and that staff are aware of fluctuating ability of psychiatric/mental health consumers. The key performance indicators should include that a service respects cultural difference. Evidence should include participation of consumers in boards of management; internal committees and individualised planning processes.

- Standard 5: should ensure services train, interact with and monitor employees and fellow workers to ensure standards are continually met; require business services to create opportunities for social interaction within the service as well as interacting with other disability agencies.
- Standard 6: should ensure services seek ways of varying tasks for consumers with intellectual disability.
- Standard 7: should assess the degree to which a service deals genuinely with a complaint, and take into account good written policy does not necessarily mean good practice. Audits should determine whether there is a culture of support to express concerns, and whether complaints are viewed as a positive opportunity to improve service quality.
- Standard 8: should be moved to follow Standard 3.
- Standard 9: should ensure that the quality of a placement is assessed. Indicators of placement quality should include stability of work, whether the work is interesting and provides contact with other people, the level of support from the service, and pay. It should also allow the number of placements to be used as an indicator of quality, as well as a functioning OH&S committee with consumer representation.
- Standard 10: evidence should include the level of access to training opportunities for consumers to develop their skills (both internal and external). Evidence should also include the degree to which open employment services provide ongoing support and follow-up to a consumer, the effectiveness of job-search and problem-solving strategies, assistance in preparing for interviews, and the degree to which workplace adjustments and modifications are provided and facilitated.
- Standard 11: should ensure there is greater continuity of staff members; and should ensure staff are assessed on the degree to which they keep up to date and involved in new developments in the field and the degree to which they pass this information to consumers and their families.
- Standard 12: should ensure services take steps to inform consumers of their rights under the Disability Discrimination Act and the recourse afforded by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission; and provide real protection for the most disadvantaged consumers who have limited understanding and communication skills.

Preferred ways of being informed about the quality strategy

Suggestions for informing consumers about the quality assurance system included:

- Informing and training staff and consumer representatives so they can communicate the ideas and process to all consumers and facilitate their involvement. Key staff and consumer representatives should play a key role in linking consumers to management. A significant proportion of consumers indicated that an ongoing program of independent rights-based education and training was essential to keeping consumers informed about the quality strategy;

- distributing an information pack about the whole process including the key performance indicators, confidentiality etc.;
- holding inter-agency meetings and forums for consumers (such as focus group meetings);
- including information in a service's newsletter;
- mailing information to the home address;
- posting information on a web site; and
- visits from an external person.

Characteristics of technical experts

Consumers generally expressed strong support for the concept of consumer technical experts, and it was thought they should have the following characteristics:

- a sense of the broader issues around disability;
- a specialist knowledge of disability employment service, and a practical hands-on approach;
- simple and effective communication skills which makes them easy to understand;
- an ability to adapt to individuals needs;
- an ability to create an environment conducive to participation (comfortable, friendly, caring etc);
- a similar disability to consumers of the service;
- experience in getting help from a disability service themselves;
- an absence of any conflict of interest;
- an ability able to accurately record consumer's opinions and ensure they are reflected in the final report;
- an unbiased attitude about the service's ability to meet the Standards;
- a strong work ethic and professional behaviour;
- the ability to acknowledge their own support needs and inform the service prior to visit; and
- cultural competency and sensitivity.

Not all consumers thought it necessary for the technical experts to have a disability themselves.

Some consumers expressed a desire to be involved in the selection of a certification body and audit teams as this involvement would:

- give consumers confidence in and ownership of the process;
- ensure consumers are comfortable with the people auditing; and
- reinforce the teamwork involved in quality improvement.

Feedback required by consumers after consultations are completed

Consumers said very strongly they want feedback from the consultation process. One suggestion included the provision of a summary report of the process and what changes were made as a result. Some consumers wanted to be informed via the facilitators who conducted the focus groups.

Other issues that were raised consistently

Some consumers expressed loyalty to their service provider and said they would be unlikely to criticise it during an audit as this may place the service at risk.

Some consumers were cynical of the reforms, as there has been talk of reforms for so many years but little has changed for them. Also, some doubted the quality assurance system would be finalised before the forthcoming federal election or that a new Government would support it.

There was some concern that the additional costs and staff time would impact negatively on the services consumers receive. There were also concerns that the system would divert funding from service provision.

Some consumers expressed uncertainty and anxiety as to whether their service would meet the standards.

Other important issues raised by individual consumers during sessions

These included:

- a concern that the system will benefit bureaucrats – eg. people on the audit team rather than consumers;
- a fear that a greater emphasis on productivity would result in them losing their employment placement;
- a fear that a stronger push to competitive employment and award wages would result in them losing benefits and concessions;
- a fear of service closures;
- a concern that particular consumer needs may not be identified in the audit process, eg people with multiple disability, drug users with disability and others that can not be neatly pigeonholed;
- the fact that success of a service depends on other agencies which are sometimes not available, such as mental health services in country areas;
- questions as to how the situation would be handled if there was a major difference in the opinion of consumers at a service and the outcome of an audit;
- consumers want more information on how to choose the right employment services;
- the location of services should be convenient; and
- that more funding for service staff and peers to learn AUSLAN, to enable participation generally for consumers with hearing impairments.

Informal assessment if consumers are pleased with quality strategy

Consumers expressed strong, broad-based support for the proposed quality strategy and indicated that if implemented there would be an improvement in service quality. There was very strong support for award-based conditions, in particular award wages, being an essential feature of the quality strategy. Consumers expressed strong support for the proposal that staff qualifications and training receive much greater attention under the proposed quality assurance system.

Consumers also expressed very strong support for the proposed independent complaint mechanism and want it available as soon as possible.