

# **SQS Benchmarking Study**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Purpose of the Study**

- 1 Appointed by the Social Welfare Department (SWD), the Research Team of the University of Hong Kong conducted a Benchmarking Study on the Service Quality Standards (SQSs) implemented in Phase 1 and Phase 2. The objective of the study is twofold -
  - 1.1 To develop a benchmarking mechanism to facilitate continuous improvement in the implementation of SQS.
  - 1.2 Through collecting and identifying general and good practice for each of the SQSs in various types of service settings, it aimed at providing a reference to service providers to benchmark its practice.

### **Definition**

- 2 General Practice - The Research Team defined it as a practice commonly implemented in the service units of similar nature. Such practice is over and above the basic requirements of SQS.
- 3 Good Example for Reference - The Research Team defined it as a practice over and above the basic requirement of SQS, not commonly implemented, and considered by service providers as a good example for the reference of other service units.

### **The Benchmarking Study - Chronological Account**

- 4 The study took about one year for its completion. The development was as follows:
  - 4.1 The benchmarking study began in March 2002.
  - 4.2 Based on literature review of similar benchmarking process, such as the US Malcolm Baldrige Award, European Quality Award, and ISO Code of Good Practice, the process and mechanism of this benchmarking study was constructed.
  - 4.3 Based on a study of the previous external assessment reports, a tentative list of criteria for identifying good practice for each SQS was developed.
  - 4.4 Four focus groups including one session for assessors were conducted in May and June to discuss the proposed benchmarking process, mechanism, and criteria. Apart from the group of SWD assessors, a total of 26 members were invited from NGOs of various size and providing services in various settings (residential, centre-based, home-based, and others).

- 4.5 Request was sent to NGOs participating in Phase 2 external assessment to provide sample documents for the benchmarking study. Fifteen NGOs were willing to participate in the study.
- 4.6 Between July and September 2002, the research team extracted 177 practices from the sample documents beyond the basic requirements of the SQSs.
- 4.7 Four panel groups of different service setting (residential services, centre services, home based services, and others, e.g. medical social services, probation service, etc. ) were formed. The 27 panelists with direct experience in implementing SQS came from different agencies (including SWD) providing different major services and from different ranks (managers/supervisors, unit heads, and frontline staff).
- 4.8 Each panel group met for three half-day sessions in October and November to discuss if the practices identified by the Research Team were general practices or good examples for reference in their respective service settings.
- 4.9 Between December 2002 and February 2003, the research team organized and analyzed the research data and prepared the draft report.

### **Summary of Observations**

- 5 Though the study can only be considered as a pilot and facing various limitation including scope (the first 10 SQSs implemented in Phase 1 and 2), coverage (15 agencies voluntarily providing sample documents), and the type of information (relying on documentation review only), the experience obtained can still serve as a basis for constructing the future benchmarking mechanism.
- 6 From the sample documents, the Research Team had extracted 177 items of practices over and above the basic requirements. Approximately 30% were considered as general practices in various service settings, with another 30% considered as good examples for reference. Most of the remaining items were general practices in one or more service settings, and could be considered as good examples for reference in other service settings.
- 7 From the focus group meetings, the Research Team was aware of service providers' worries about the relations between benchmarking and the assessment yardsticks. The Research Team believed that as long as we could maintain the review process of the SQS requirements and the benchmarking process as two separate mechanisms, and the use of panels with wide representation to decide on what is general practice and good example for reference, these worries would be adequately addressed.
- 8 From the extracting of data and discussion in the panel meetings, the Research Team and the panels observed that in a number of flow-charts, there were room for improvement. Thus, the Research Team had produced a guide for developing flow-charts in the report.

- 9 The Research Team and panelists also had raised some doubts to the necessity of some of the practices, particularly the various guidelines. Thus, the Research Team had produced a note advising the proper use of operational guidelines in the report.

### **Data Collection and Practices Extraction**

- 10 Apart from facing the limitation mentioned in Paragraph 5 above, data collection and the review of documents practically was a repetition of the work conducted by the assessors during the external assessment process.
- 11 Throughout the data extraction process, the Research Team had adopted the strategy of neutrality and leaving most of the judgement of whether the practice is good or not, relevant to SQS or not, or whether necessary, to the Panels.

### **Panel Formation**

- 12 From the experience of the present study, the Research Team considered dividing the panels into four different service settings and inviting colleagues from different agencies, different major services, and ranks as appropriate.
- 13 Allowing each panel to operate independently and making no cross-reference, the panel system helped to ensure the neutrality of the process.

### **Recommendations on the Future Benchmarking Studies**

#### **14 Organization responsible for the implementation of future benchmarking studies**

The Research Team recommended that the Service Performance Section (SPS) of the SWD should conduct the future benchmarking studies. Such arrangement would be more cost-effective and could avoid the limitations faced by the current study in collecting information.

#### **15 The Panel System**

- 15.1 To maintain the independence and representativeness of the findings, the panel system should be implemented in the future benchmarking studies.
- 15.2 The formation of panels of future benchmarking studies could make reference to the experience in the current study, i.e. forming panels of different service settings and inviting members with direct experience in implementing SQS in different agencies, different major services, and of different ranks.

**16 The frequency of future benchmarking studies**

The Research Team recommended a gradually reducing frequency of future benchmarking studies, i.e.

|              | <b>Time of Data Collection</b>                                | <b>Panel Meetings</b> |
|--------------|---|-----------------------|
| First Study  | Mid-2003 when full implementation of SQS begins               | mid-2004              |
| Second Study | Mid-2005 when the last year of the first 3-year cycle begins  | mid-2006              |
| Third Study  | Mid-2008 when the last year of the second 3-year cycle begins | mid-2009              |
| Fourth Study | Subject to review after the third study                       |                       |