

Quality in Higher Education
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Concepts of Quality in Higher Education: A review of the literature

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Introduction

What is quality ? Is there a single definition which explains its use in all circumstances? What do people mean when they use the word 'quality' in relation to higher education? How does the concept relate to others in higher education such as 'standards' and 'excellence'? (Ball, 1985; Gibson, 1986; Goodlad, 1988; HMI, 1989a)

Quality, like 'freedom' or 'justice' is an elusive concept (Gibson, 1986; van Vught, 1992). We all have an intuitive understanding of what it means but it is often hard to articulate. It is also a value-laden term: it is subjectively associated with that which is good and worthwhile (Dochy 1990). For this reason it is claimed by many to validate or justify an activity: sometimes with scant attention to what the word might mean. This makes it difficult to discern how the word is being used in a particular circumstance. Nevertheless, some different approaches can be identified (Harvey and Green, 1992; Richardson, 1992).

The traditional concept of quality

The traditional concept of quality is associated with the notion of providing a product or service which is distinctive and special and which confers status on the owner or user. Extremely high standards of production, delivery and presentation are set which can only be achieved at great expense, or with the use of scarce resources, thus putting them out of reach of the majority of the population. The notion of exclusivity is implied (Pfeffer and Coote, 1991).

The exemplar often used is that of the Rolls Royce. In higher education, it might equate with most people's perception of Oxford and Cambridge universities, both in terms of the distinctive and special student experience which they provide, and in terms of the graduate and research output. However, this concept of quality is not of much value when it comes to assessing quality in higher education as a whole. If all institutions were judged by the same criteria as those used to judge Oxford and Cambridge, most would be continually condemned as poor quality. Even if it were possible to make every institution like Oxford and Cambridge, would it be desirable?

Conformance to specification or standards

Second, there is the notion of quality as conformance to a specification or standard (Walsh, 1991). This approach has its origins in the notions of quality control in the manufacturing industry.

It is, perhaps, worthwhile being totally clear about what the term 'standard' means in this context. It is a basis for measurement or a 'yardstick' - a neutral term to describe a required characteristic of a product or service .

A specification for a product or service comprises a number of standards. The quality of the product or services is measured in terms of its conformance to the specification. Quality control in this context relates to testing the product or service to see whether it meets the standards set and rejecting those which do not conform.

This type of approach to quality is currently fashionable in the public services and is demonstrated by the number of charters that have been produced, 18 in all at the last count, including the Parents' Charter in relation to education and the Patients' Charter in relation to the health service. Each contains a series of service standards which, if met, produce a quality service for the 'customer'.

This approach to quality has an advantage over the earlier definition in its application to higher education. It gives all institutions an opportunity to aspire to quality as different standards can be set for different types of institution. Under this definition, it is perfectly possible to have a poor quality Rolls Royce and a high quality Mini.

The disadvantages with this model is that it tells us nothing about the criteria used to set the standards and, unless the standards are in line with our understanding of what is significant, we may not agree that something is a quality product or service even if it conforms to the standards that have been set for it (the British Rail standard for a train being on time is an example here).

It is also essentially a static model (Walsh, 1991) as it implies that once a specification has been defined it does not need to be reconsidered. As the pace of technological change in society increases, however, it seems likely that services and products will need to be

revised to reflect new circumstances.

Finally, it implies that the quality of a service can be defined in terms of standards that are easily measurable and quantifiable and this may not be the case in higher education.

A diversion about standards

The use of the term 'standard' causes other difficulties in relation to higher education as it is often used in a different sense to that defined above: it is used to mean excellence or a high standard (Reynolds 1986; Moodie 1986). When the word is used in this context it is sometimes difficult to be clear what is being talked about. A concern that standards are dropping may be taken to mean either that the level of achievement required to pass a course has been lowered, or that students are achieving a lower level of performance even though the standard (in the more neutral 'yardstick' sense of the term) remains the same.

In some circumstances academic standards in terms of student achievement appears to be equated with quality in higher education as in the following statement by Kenneth Clarke when he was Secretary of State for Education and Science:

The statistics speak for themselves, with the proportion of graduates in PCFC sector institutions gaining first and upper seconds having risen alongside the surge in student numbers. There are plenty of examples from HMI to show how increasing numbers need not adversely affect quality - quite the reverse. (DES, 1991b)

Sometimes the term academic standards is used just in relation to the output of higher education in terms of student achievement as in the example described above. However, it may also be used in a much broader sense in relation to the whole range of activities concerning teaching and learning and research in higher education including admissions procedures, the content of courses, methods of delivery, physical resources and so on (HMI, 1990).

In analysing quality in relation to higher education it is therefore important to be clear how the term 'standard' is being defined and applied.

Quality as fitness for purpose

The definition of quality adopted by most analysts and policy makers in higher education is that of fitness for purpose (Ball, 1985; HMI, 1989; Reynolds, 1986; Crawford, 1991). Exponents of this approach argue that quality has no meaning except in relation to the purpose of the product or service. Quality is judged in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose(s).

This definition, therefore, provides a model for determining what the specification for a quality product or service should be. It is also developmental as it recognises that purposes may change over times thus requiring constant re-evaluation of the

appropriateness of the specification. It may be used to analyse quality in higher education at a number of levels. For example, if the purpose of higher education is to provide an appropriately educated work force, is the system as a whole providing the right number of graduates? Is a particular course providing the right balance of knowledge, skills and understanding? Is an institution achieving the purposes it set for itself in its mission statement?

The problem with this definition of quality in higher education is that it is difficult to be clear what the purposes of higher education should be. In recent years there have been few attempts amongst policy makers to define the purposes of higher education which have gone beyond that provided by the Robbins Committee (Robbins 1963) which stated that the objectives of higher education were 'instruction in skills', 'to promotion the general powers of the mind', 'advancement of learning' and 'transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship'. The White Paper Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge (DES, 1987) took this definition and added to it an emphasis concerning meeting the needs of the economy. However, different stakeholders in higher education may have different views about this issue. Who should define the purposes of higher education? Should it be the government or should it be the students, the employers of students, the managers of institutions or the academic professionals? It is theoretically possible that all these groups would concur on the purposes of higher education, but more likely that there would be at least some differences of opinion.

Finally, higher education may have multiple purposes, some of which are conflicting. How would these conflicts be resolved in judging the quality of an institution? Who would determine the priorities? (Billing 1986; Taylor 1981).

De Weert's version of the fitness for purpose concept of quality tries to deal with these issues. He defines quality in terms of goal achievement but notes that the goals for higher education will vary depending on the level of the system at which the goals are set (societal, institutional, individual) and whether they are of internal or external relevance. Thus quality is seen as multi-dimensional and incorporating possibly conflicting goals at different levels. Any attempt at defining quality is seen as a balancing act between different goals at different levels in the system (De Weert, 1990)

Quality as effectiveness in achieving institutional goals

One version of the 'fitness for purpose' model concentrates on evaluating quality in higher education at the institutional level. A high quality institution is one which clearly states its mission (or purpose) and is efficient and effective in meeting the goals which it has set itself. This approach can be seen in a number of instances. For example, the CVCP academic audit unit makes it clear that it starts from the premise that there is no 'gold standard' in higher education (CVCP AAU 1990). The universities individually determine their own definitions of quality and standards and the Academic Audit Unit, through its audit process, seeks to evaluate whether the quality assurance system that the university has established is successfully achieving its aims and objectives.

This view of quality is also implied in the White Paper Higher Education: A New Framework (DES, 1991) in terms of the government's desire to ensure that new funding arrangements for teaching should be 'related to and safeguard the best of the distinctive missions of individual institutions' and in the pressure to develop performance indicators.

This model has significant implications for higher education as it broadens the spectrum of issues deemed relevant to the debate about quality to include performance in areas such as efficiency in use of resources or effective management.

Quality as meeting customers stated or implied needs

During the last twenty years, the definition of quality most often used in industry has evolved and is no longer defined solely in terms of conformance to a specification but in terms of meeting customers' needs. High priority is placed on identifying customers' needs as a crucial factor in the design of a product or service. In Deming's terms 'the difficulty in defining quality is to translate future needs of the user into measurable characteristics, so that a product can be designed and turned out to give satisfaction at a price that the user will pay.' (Deming 1982).

Using this definition of quality, therefore, it is clear that fitness for purpose should be related to customers' needs. Yet there are a number of complications in defining quality as meeting customers' needs, particularly in the public service sector.

Who is the customer in higher education? Is it the service user (the students) or is it those who pay for the service (the government, the employers)? Is the student the consumer, the product or both?

Taking the view that it is the service user or student who is the customer raises a number of difficulties, particularly in the evaluation of the service. While it may be relatively easy to identify the physical needs of students in higher education in terms of access to adequate library provision and adequate student accommodation, the heart of the education service is arguably the relationship between the lecturer and student in the teaching and learning process. Unlike the manufacturing industry, the producers and customers (lecturers and students) are both part of the production process making the process individual and personal, depending on the characteristics of both the producer and the consumer.

The result of these characteristics is that standards of quality are difficult to state and maintain. In some cases services are not only physically but mentally intangible, because they are difficult to grasp and understand. (Walsh, 1991)

Some critics of this approach to defining quality in relation to higher education ask whether students are in a position to know what their needs are. They may be able to identify their short term needs, but do they have enough knowledge and experience to know what they need in the long term? Are they in a position to judge whether their needs are being met? (Roberts and Higgins, 1992) The usual response to this issue is that

satisfying students' needs is not the same as satisfying their wants (Marchese, 1991). It also points to the need to make an analytical distinction between different concepts of quality and the best methods for assuring or assessing quality. Defining quality as meeting customers' needs does not necessarily imply that the customer is always best placed to determine what quality is or whether it is present. This definition, therefore, also leaves open the question about who should define quality in higher education and how it should be assessed.

The pragmatic definition of quality in higher education

Given the difficulties in defining quality in higher education, some have opted out of trying to find an underlying theory or definition (Dochy 1990; Moodie 1986). Vroeijenstijn (1991) says 'it is a waste of time to try to define Quality'. The basis of this argument is that quality is a relative concept, that different interest groups or 'stakeholders' in higher education have different priorities and their focus of attention may be different (Burrows and Harvey, 1992; Harvey, Burrows and Green, 1992b; 1992c). For example, the focus of attention for students and lecturers might be on the process of education while the focus of employers might be on the outputs of higher education. It is not possible, therefore to talk about quality as a unitary concept, quality must be defined in terms of a range of qualities, with recognition that an institution may be of high quality in relation to one factor but low quality in relation to another.

The best that can be achieved is to define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken.

Conclusion

In the last resort quality is a philosophical concept. Definitions of quality vary and, to some extent, reflect different perspectives of the individual and society. In a democratic society there must be room for people to hold different views: there is no single definition of quality which is right to the exclusion of all others. Indeed, we may catch ourselves switching from one perspective to another without being conscious of any conflict.

Even if we opt for one definition of quality, 'fitness for purpose' for example, the conclusions that we reach when interpreting this notion for higher education would depend on our values and our priorities. The outcomes might be very different depending on who defines the purpose.

Looking at the criteria different interest groups use in judging quality rather than starting with a single definition might offer the best practical solution - not because it is atheoretical, but because it recognises and acknowledges the rights of different interest groups to have different perspectives.

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