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Editorial

The Key Issues: the quality agenda

Quality is an important feature of every facet of higher education. Policy and strategic matters, the organisation of higher education, and teaching and learning processes all need to address quality issues.

Much research needs to be done to assess the impact, at local, national and international level, of policies and practices on the quality of the process and outputs of higher education. *Quality in Higher Education* is a vehicle for such research. In this issue, for example, Mantz Yorke analyses performance indicators in higher education, Ron Johnston, Kelvin Jones and Myles Gould assess the relationship between department size and the quality of research output and Stephen Fearnley assesses the impact of class size on student performance.

Throughout the world, as higher education expands from an élite to a mass system, practitioners are finding ways to deal with change, in conditions of declining relative resources. Good practice, which helps to maintain or improve quality, and which can be adopted or developed in other settings, is an invaluable resource. *Quality in Higher Education* provides reflective accounts of the introductions of such processes. In this issue, E. M. Bitzer and W. S. Malherbe discuss a process for assuring teaching quality within the institution and Richard Hill argues for more direct student involvement in the development stages of quality monitoring processes.

The changes in higher education reflect a fundamental shift in the aims and purposes of higher education. These in turn require an analysis of how they relate to social philosophical issues about the nature of education and its relation to analyses of the social world. *Quality in Higher Education* also explores the future shape of higher education, and how that future leads us to address issues of quality anew. In this issue, Barry Harker explores quality as a postmodern construction.

Last, but by no means least, is the need to clarify the concept of quality and of other concepts that impinge upon it. The final part of this editorial offers some thoughts on the concepts of quality and standards and the interrelationship between the two.

The research agenda for quality in higher education is extensive. Among other things, studies are needed that evaluate external quality monitoring, the relationship between quality and academic freedom, the impact on quality of closer links between higher education and industry, funding mechanisms to enhance quality and the impact on the student experience of quality monitoring and innovation in teaching and learning.

External Quality Monitoring

External quality monitoring is being developed in many countries. Research that explores the effectiveness of different systems, their applicability to the changing world of higher education and their impact on teaching and learning, research, and the abilities of students is urgently needed.

Is external monitoring as effective as internal monitoring? Is a top-down accountability-led process as effective as a bottom-up, improvement-oriented process? Should quality

assessment be linked to resources? If so, should resources be allocated to improve low achievers or reward high achievers? Who should be responsible for the quality of learning and of research? Who should accredit programmes of study: should, for example, professional or regulatory bodies have any control of the content and teaching method of courses? We need comparative research to help us answer some of these questions. Far too many of the answers currently invoked rely upon opinion and prejudice.

Academic Freedom

On a broader front, what evidence do we have that quality in higher education is related to the degree of academic freedom? Do higher education institutions produce higher quality outcomes if they are autonomous. The Scandinavian countries, for example, are reducing the amount of direct central government control, while at the same time requiring increased accountability from universities. In Britain, South Africa and to some extent in the US, the autonomy of higher education institutions is being reduced by procedures to make them more accountable to central government or state legislatures.

\ In some African countries, there is clear hostility between governments and the academic community. Recently, the Association of African Universities has expressed concern about the suspicion, mutual distrust and occasional violence between government and academia in Kenya, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire.

In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, the incoming government of the Peoples Alliance Party has promised universities greater autonomy, increased student places and better facilities. The new government believes in a university system that encourages free thinking. Among proposed changes are maintenance and further improvement in the quality and standards of university education, encouragement of the revision of existing curricula and introduction of new courses.

Is academic freedom a necessary prerequisite of an effective higher education system? What evidence is there to suggest that autonomy leads to a better student experience? Or is some centralised control necessary to assure the quality of the student experience? What kind of organisation and control of the higher education system is most effective in ensuring high quality learning and research?

Academia and Industry

There is increasing pressure for higher education to attract money from industry and commerce. In Germany, for example, the Zukunftsministerium, which combines the old ministries of research and education, has been established to encourage closer links between higher education and industry. A recent OECD report proposed that Danish universities focus more attention on the commercial application of their research effort. The report recommends that marketing be an integral, obligatory part of research and development projects and that major government financing should be contingent upon presentation of an appropriate marketing plan. A recent study in Britain has suggested that, for some industries, links to universities make good business sense. High technology firms based on university science parks seem to be outperforming similar firms elsewhere.

What are the implications for higher education of closer links to industry? Is there any evidence that the quality of higher education will be compromised? A recent survey in Britain showed that senior managers of higher education establishments and business people thought that an influx of commercial funds would be beneficial to universities.

However, less than half of the lecturers surveyed agreed. This suggests considerable scepticism about industry links at the 'grassroots'.

Is a closer link between higher education and industry inevitable? If so, how will the future system of higher education be organised and funded? Who will own and control the outputs of a collaborative industry-higher educational system?

Funding

The funding of mass higher education continues to be a major issue with consequences for quality. Most countries are facing an increase in student numbers in already-overstretched higher education systems without a congruent increase in resources. There has been recent student unrest over increases in fees, overcrowding or inadequate funding in Italy, France, New Zealand, Australia, Nigeria, and South Africa among others. Staff concerns about the implications of reduced unit costs have been voiced in many countries.

Round the world, student hardship and poverty is an increasing problem. Systems that award some form of maintenance, such as Sweden and the United Kingdom are cutting back and are increasingly replacing grants with loans. This is leading to severe hardship. In South Africa, for example, 10% of students defaulted on payment of their fees.

As postgraduate study becomes increasingly the route into good jobs there is a tendency for it to become the province of those who can pay. In Australia, for example, the fees on some taught postgraduate courses has increased dramatically since 1989, the year of deregulation of fees. According to a survey by the Council of Postgraduate Associations the alarming rise in fees disadvantage 'women and students with low incomes'. What evidence is there that a different funding process, for example, treating postgraduate education the same as undergraduate education would overcome these inequalities.

The World Bank, in a recent controversial report, argued that higher education should be turned into an industry in the 'third world'. Will 'privatising' higher education restrict access and lead to a concentration of power and resources in the hands of an élite? In France, an élite system based on the of grand écoles remains in tact and Christian Baudelot has warned that 'unequal access to knowledge is sowing the seeds of violence'. What evidence is there that fostering an élite tier of universities would be a good use of scarce resources?

The Student Experience and Attainment

More and more emphasis is being placed on the total student experience of higher education and the range of attainments of students. How is the quality of the student experience to be operationalised? How much should students be empowered to comment on the suitability of curricula, assessment procedures and teaching style? Exactly what is the student experience in a modem university? What kind of interaction do students have with teachers and with their peers?

What research is being undertaken that reflects on the impact of different teaching and learning styles on the experience and attainments of students? What evidence is there, for example, that innovative teaching and learning processes improve the quality of the student experience, or ensure better levels and diversity of attainment?

How has the unitisation of knowledge, in modular schemes or other forms of disaggregation impacted on the diversity and level of attainment of students?

Are standards of student attainment being eroded by a mass higher education system, or is the nature of the outcomes changing? How are standards set and monitored? What should they relate to and who has a role in identifying criteria for the assessment of standards? Is it meaningful to compare the outputs of élite systems suitable for a bygone era with the outputs of a mass system set in a global economy?

There is increasing pressure to reduce the time undergraduates spend in higher education. In Britain, the government has tinkered with the idea of reducing the undergraduate degree from three to two years, although this is strongly resisted by industry. In Germany the concern is to reduce the amount of time students spend in higher education, typically six years. In Denmark, initial attempts to introduce a more widely accepted Bachelor award, after three years, has been widely opposed, not least by employers.

Whatever the attainment of students, there are no longer a clearly defined set of 'graduate jobs'. For example, the Australian Graduate Careers Council survey of 75,000 new graduates showed that a significant proportion were doing jobs previously done by school leavers; with a consequent drop in starting salary. Are graduates now doing jobs for which they are over-qualified, or have the jobs that were previously been done by school leavers become more complex or multi-dimensional? Have organisational structures changed so that employees (including graduates) work on a variety of levels? Or have standards gone down so that what graduates can do only matches what school leavers previously did?

Perhaps the set of skills required has shifted away from subject knowledge to a range of abilities and aptitudes and this is why graduates, ill-equipped with many transferable skills, are not getting recruited to what were previously 'graduate level' jobs. According to the Association of Graduate recruiters in Britain, a fifth of top companies reported a serious recruitment shortfall despite the availability of more graduates. Recruiters reported that they were not prepared to compromise on graduate quality, which was thought to be insufficiently high.

Quality and Standards

The issue of quality and standards is a complex one that is constantly confounded by unclear usage of terms. There is a pressing need for the clarification of the notions of 'quality' and 'standards' and an analysis of the relationship between them. An initial exploration of these concepts is offered by way of conclusion.

Quality

Quality can no longer be taken for granted in higher education. This is not to impugn the integrity of academics nor doubt the desire of higher education institutions to maintain standards. It is to ask fundamental questions about the concept of quality itself.

Throughout the world, the quality of higher education is being assessed. This involves operationalising the notion of quality in some way, which in turn requires a clear statement about the concept of quality that is being measured. It appears that far too often, quality assessment and assurance processes have started by determining how quality is to be assessed or reviewed rather than by asking what, fundamentally, is it that is to be assessed.

There are five broad approaches to quality identifiable in relation to in higher education (Harvey & Green, 1993); quality as:

- exceptional;
- perfection;
- fitness for purpose;
- value for money;
- transformative.

The *exceptional* view sees quality as something special. Traditionally, quality refers to something distinctive and élitist, and, in educational terms is linked to notions of excellence, of 'high quality' unattainable by most

Quality as *perfection* sees quality as a consistent or flawless outcome. In a sense it 'democratises' the notion of quality and if consistency can be achieved then quality can be attained by all.

Quality as *fitness for purpose* sees quality in terms of fulfilling a customer's requirements, needs or desires. Theoretically, the customer specifies requirements. In education, fitness for purpose is usually based on the ability of an institution to fulfil its mission or a programme of study to fulfil its aims.

Quality as *value for money* sees quality in terms of return on investment. If the same outcome can be achieved at a lower cost, or a better outcome can be achieved at the same cost, then the 'customer' has a quality product or service. The growing tendency for governments to require accountability from higher education reflects a value-for-money approach. Increasingly students require value-for-money for the increasing cost to them of higher education.

Quality as *transformation* is a classic notion of quality that sees it in terms of change from one state to another. In educational terms, transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of knew knowledge.

Quality issues in higher education are also closely related to issues of standards. Indeed, it is evident that, in debates about the nature and functioning of higher education, there is considerable overlap between the concepts of 'quality' and 'standards'. However, quality and standards are not the same. 'Standards' are specified and usually measurable outcome indicators which are used for comparative purposes.

Standards

In education, standards relate to three areas of activity:

- academic standards;
- standards of competence;
- service standards.

Academic standards measure ability to meet specified levels of academic attainment. In relation to teaching and learning this refers to the ability of students to fulfil the requirements of the programme of study, through whatever mode of assessment is required. This usually requires demonstration of knowledge and understanding. Implicitly, other skills are assessed, such as communication skills. Sometimes 'higher, level' skills, such as analysis, comprehension, interpretation, synthesis and critique are explicitly assessed. For research, academic standards are less precise and usually imply the ability to undertake effective scholarship or produce new knowledge, which is assessed via peer recognition.

Standards of competence measure specified levels of ability on a range of competencies. Competencies may include general transferable skills required by employers; skills

required for induction into a profession; and academic (or 'higher level') abilities, skills and aptitudes implicit or explicit in the attainment of an award. These may be stated or inferred in taught course objectives or be a part of the expectations of competences to be achieved by research students.

The relationship between academic standards and standards of competence is not clear cut and, to some extent, is a pragmatic distinction. For some definitions of quality, such as the 'exceptional' approach, the distinction between academic standard and standard of competence is more pronounced than, for example, in the 'transformative' approach (see Table 1).

Service standards are measures devised to assess identified elements of the service or facilities provided. Such standards may include turnaround times for assessing student work; maximum class sizes; frequency of personal tutorials; availability of information on complaints procedures; time-lag on introducing recommended reading into libraries; and so on. Benchmarks are often specified in 'contracts' such as student charters. They tend to be quantifiable and restricted to measurable items, including the presence or absence of an element of service or a facility. *Post hoc* measurement of customer opinions (satisfaction) are used as indicators of service provision. Thus, service standards in higher education parallel consumer standards.

Interrelationship Between Quality and Standards

The interrelationship between quality and standards depends on the approach to quality and the particular notion of standard. With five 'definitions' of quality and three 'definitions' of standards there are fifteen interrelationships (see Table 1).

The exceptional approach to quality emphasises the maintenance of academic standards, through the summative assessment of knowledge. It presumes an implicit, normative 'gold standard' both for learning and for research. It continues to advocate élitism, even within a mass education system. It prioritises knowledge over skills, other than 'high-level skills' or professional competence. The approach presumes that service standards are dependent on inputs such as well-qualified staff, well-stocked libraries, well-equipped laboratories and students with good entry qualifications. There is a reluctance to expose professional (teaching) competence to scrutiny.

The perfection approach emphasises consistency in external quality monitoring of academic, competence and service standards. Its emphasis on a consistent process producing a defect-free output is inconsistent with the exploratory nature of higher learning. Its principal focus within institutions is on flawless and accessible administrative support systems.

The fitness-for-purpose approach relates standards to specified purpose-related, objectives. Therefore, in theory, it requires criteria-referenced assessment of students. However, as purposes, as specified in mission-statements or course aims, often include a comparative element criteria-referencing is mediated by norm-referenced criteria. The approach tends towards explicit specification of skills and abilities and requires clear evidence by which to identify threshold standards. Professional competence is primarily assessed in terms of threshold minimums against professional body requirements for practice. Purposes usually specify or imply minimum service standards for such things as professional standards of competence-of service providers, support for students, both academic and pastoral, and the interrelationship of teaching, scholarship and research.

The value-for-money approach places emphasis on a 'good deal' for the customer or client, usually government, employer, student or parents. It requires the maintenance or

TABLE 1

Standards		Academic standards	Standards of competence	Service standards
	Definition	The demonstrated ability to meet specified level of academic attainment. For pedagogy, the ability of students to be able to do those things designated as appropriate at a given level of education. Usually, the measured competence of an individual in attaining specified (or implied) course aims and objectives; operationalised via performance on assessed pieces of work. For research, the ability to undertake effect scholarship or produce new knowledge, which is assessed via peer recognition	Demonstration that a specified level of ability on a range of competencies has been achieved. Competencies may include general transferable skills required by employers; academic ('higher level') skills implicit or explicit in the attainment of degree status or in a post-graduation academic apprenticeship; particular abilities congruent with induction into a profession	Are measures devised to assess identified elements of the service provided against specified benchmarks. Elements assessed include activities of service providers and facilities within which the service takes place. Benchmarks specified in 'contracts' such as student charters tend to be quantified and restricted to measurable items. *Post hoc* measurement of customer opinions (satisfaction) are used as indicators of service provision. Thus, service standards in higher education parallel consumer standards
Quality	**Definition**			
Exceptional	A traditional concept linked to the idea of 'excellence', usually operationalised as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed	Emphasis on summative assessment of knowledge and, implicitly, some 'higher-level' skills. Implicit normative gold-standard. Comparative evaluation of research output. Elitism: the presupposition of a need to maintain pockets of high quality and standards in a mass education system	Linked to professional competence; emphasis mainly on traditional demarcation between knowledge and (professional) skills	Input-driven assumptions of resource-linked service/ facilities. Good facilities, well-qualified staff, etc 'guarantee' service standards. Reluctance to expose professional (teaching) competence to scrutiny
Perfection or consistency	Focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet. Quality in this sense is summed up by the interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right first time	Meaningless, except for an idealistic notion that peer scrutiny of standards or quality will be undertaken in a consistent manner	Expectation of a minimum prescribed level of professional competence. Problem in assessing for 'zero defects'	Primary relevance in ensuring service-standard based quality—mainly in relation to administrative processes (accuracy and reliability of keeping, timetables coursework arrangements, etc.)
Fitness for purpose	Judges quality in terms of the extent to which product or service meets its stated purpose, The purpose may be customer-defined to meet requirements or (in education) institution-defined to reflect institutional mission (or course objectives)	Theoretically, standards should relate to the defined objectives that relate to the purpose of the course (or institution). Summative assessment should be criteria referenced, although as purposes often include a comparative element (e.g. in mission statement) these are mediated by norm-referenced criteria	Explicit specification of skills and abilities related to objectives. Evidence required to at least identify threshold standards. Professional competence primarily assessed in terms of threshold minimums against professional body requirements for practice	The purpose involves the provision of a service. Thus, process is assessed in terms of (minimum) standards for the purpose—usually in terms of teaching competence, the link between teaching and research, student support (academic and non-academic) and so on
Value for money	Assesses quality in terms of return on investment or expenditure. At the heart of the value for-money approach in education is the notion of accountability. Public services including education, are expected to be accountable to the funders. Increasingly, students are also considering their own investment in higher education in value-for-money terms	Maintainance or improvement of academic outcomes (graduate standards and research output) for the same (or declining) unit of resource. That is, ensure greater efficiency. Similarly, improve the process-experience of students. Concern that efficiency gains work in the opposite direction to quality improvement. Provide students with an academic experience (qualification, training, personal development) to warrant the investment	Maintain or improve the output or generally 'employable' graduates for the same unit of resource. Similarly, ensure a continual or increasing supply of recruits to post-graduation professional bodies. Provide students with an educational experience that increases competence, in relation to career advancement, which ensures a return on investment	Customer satisfaction analyses (students, employers' funding bodies) to assess process and outcomes. Students and other stakeholders are seen as 'paying customers'. Customer charters specify minimum levels of service (and facilities) that students (parents' employers) can expect
Transformation	Sees quality as a process of change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning experience. Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant. This leads to two notions of transformative quality in education; enhancing the consumer and empowering the consumer	Assessment of students in terms of the standard of acquisition of transformative knowledge and skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation) against explicit objectives. Focus on adding value rather than gold standards. As transformation involves empowerment, formative as well as summative assessment is required. Transformative research standards are assessed in terms of *impact* in relation to objectives	Provide students with enhanced skills and abilities that empower them to continue learning and to engage effectively with the complexities of the 'outside' world. Assessment of students in terms of the acquisition of transformative skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation) and the transformative impact they have post-graduation	Emphasis on specification and assessment of standards of service and facilities that enable the process of student learning and the acquisition of transformative abilities

improvement of academic standards, of both graduate abilities and research output, for the same (or declining) unit of resource. It also expects the maintenance of the supply of competent recruits to post-graduation professional bodies and suitably skilled graduates for employment. Similarly, the approach expects that the teaching and learning experienced by students does not significantly decline and, indeed, that innovations improve the experience in relation to clearly specified objectives. Minimum service standards are frequently specified in student charters. Students expect that the academic standard of their course and the competencies they acquire will have currency outside the institution and will be an adequate return on their investment of time and money. The value-for-money approach prioritises efficiency and accountability to 'clients' and 'customers'.

The transformative approach uses standards to assess the enhancement of students both in terms of academic knowledge and a broader set of transformative skills, such as analysis, critique, lateral thinking, innovation, and communication. As transformation involves empowerment, formative as well as summative assessment is required. Transformative research standards are assessed in terms of impact in relation to objectives. Service standards emphasise the specification facilities that enable the process of student learning and the acquisition of transformative abilities.

Comparative Analyses

Quality in Higher Education especially welcomes comparative analyses of issues, based on empirical research, case studies of practice or theoretical discourse. The journal welcomes research reports that cast light on any of the range of aspects of quality outlined above. Case studies of practices in operation at a local, national or international level that provide insights into quality issues are also encouraged as are theoretical analyses of the concept and context of quality. The quality agenda will continue to grow as the nature and purpose of higher education shifts to reflect the rapidly changing world economy. *Quality in Higher Education* will provide a forum for this changing agenda.

Reference

HARVEY, L. & GREEN, D., 1993, 'Defining quality', Assessment *and Evaluation in Higher Education,* 18, pp. 9-34.