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The End of Quality?

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Does the development of mass education necessarily mean the end of quality?

**Dr Laurie Lomas,
Canterbury Christ Church University College**

Abstract

Four of Harvey and Green's five definitions of quality are used as an analytical framework to examine whether the massification of higher education is bringing about the end of quality. Recent small-scale research with a sample of senior managers in higher education institutions revealed that fitness for purpose and transformation were the two most appropriate definitions of quality. Problems of measuring quality as transformation would suggest that this interpretation of quality is at an end. However, the gauging of fitness for purpose through Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) subject reviews indicates that the quality of mass higher education, in these terms, is not at an end.

Introduction

Scott (1995) uses the term massification to describe the development of mass higher education during the latter part of the twentieth century. In 1962, there were 125,000 students at 25 universities whereas in 1996 there were more than a million students at just over 100 universities. In the early 1970s, 14% of eighteen year olds attended university yet in 1996 the figure was 30% (Leadbetter, 1996) and participation in higher education is now over 32% of those in the 18-21 age group (Gibbs, 2001). Not only has the increase in numbers diminished the élitist nature of HEIs, but also this trend has been assisted by an increase in the proportion of non-standard entry students. These are students who do not have the usual minimum requirement of 2 'A' levels for undergraduate courses. At Liverpool John Moores University, the proportion of non-standard entrants was nearly 75% (Rust, 1997). Whether this massification has led to the end of quality will depend to a significant extent on how quality is defined and interpreted.

Definitions of quality in the higher education sector

Harvey and Green (1993) provide a heuristic framework for attempting to define quality by suggesting that it can be viewed as excellence, as transformative, as fitness for purpose or as value for money. There was a fifth definition of quality – perfection. However, for the analytical framework and the empirical research it was decided not to use this category. Perfection refers to the flawless consistency of a product or service. This approach to quality is the basis of much of Japanese motor car manufacture but it is inappropriate in a higher education setting as it is not the purpose of a higher education institution to “produce” students who are the same (Harvey and Green, op. cit.). The four definitions of quality will be discussed in the context of higher education and employed as an analytical framework to examine whether the massification of higher education has led to the end of quality. It needs to be borne in mind that any one of the definitions of quality is not mutually exclusive. Quality is often viewed as a blend of two or more of the definitions.

Quality as excellence

This is the traditional notion of quality that equates it to excellence (Harvey and Knight, 1996). Just as a Rolls Royce car is universally regarded as a ‘quality’ car because of the high standard of its components, engineering and finishing, so it is possible for a higher education institution to be viewed in the same way.

Massification has led to the development of the argument that ‘more means worse’. Proponents of this argument claim that massification leads to poorer quality provision. Professor Tooley of the University of Newcastle said that certain academic programmes provided by modern universities, Football and Women’s Studies, for example, are contributing to falling expectations and standards (Swain, 1999). Stephen Rowland, when Director of the Higher Education Research Centre at the University of Sheffield, went further saying that the mass higher education system had led to many higher education institutions becoming largely institutions of vocational training (Rowland, 1999). In 2000, Chris Woodhead whilst chief inspector of schools claimed that universities were devaluing higher education by providing a “plethora of quasi-academic courses” through vacuous degrees in media studies, knitwear, beauty therapy and golf course management (Smithers, 2000).

However, many academics do not subscribe to this notion of ‘dumbing down’, arguing that the higher education curriculum should be relevant to all groups in society. In other words, it was a case of ‘more means different’ rather than ‘more means worse’ (Swain, op. cit.). An editorial in the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES, 1999) weighed in on the side of those who believed that standards were being maintained. It argued that the fact that nearly one in four undergraduates failed to complete their degree programmes (Goddard, 1999) was unsurprising as increased access was bound to involve the enrolment of a certain proportion of less well-prepared students. Thus, drop out rates would be sure to rise to take account of these students unless standards were lowered to accommodate them. It is worth pointing out that these non-completion rates were not affected by the introduction of student fees in September 1998 as the data relates to the period between 1994 and 1997.

Clearly the nature of higher education has changed with, for example, less dependence on the relationship between lecturer and student as large scale lectures, the internet, e-mail and distance learning materials become used to a far greater extent to communicate knowledge. A smaller proportion of students now live on campus leading to the university being less of an academic community than it was in the 1960s and 1970s (Barrett, 1998).

To return to the analogy of the Rolls Royce, Morgan (2001) considers that John Randall, head of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), is proposing to apply a 'lighter touch' MOT to a veteran Rolls Royce whilst applying far more stringent standards to a relatively modern Lada. Perhaps this suggests that Randall acknowledges that there are sites of excellence in certain Oxbridge colleges and Redbrick universities and that his concerns about quality relate to the modern post-1992 universities which have played a key role in the massification of higher education.

Quality as fitness for purpose

Fitness for purpose requires that the product or service fulfils a customer's needs, requirements or desires. Higher education goals are articulated at a general institutional level through an organisation's mission statement and at a more precise academic level through a particular programme's aims and learning outcomes. The present QAA subject review methodology, like the ISO 9000 series quality assurance procedures, can be seen as being based on this notion of fitness for purpose. In simple terms, they both require organisations to say what they do, do what they say and then prove it to a third party (Seddon, 2000). They are both concerned with rooting out non-conformance and ensuring adherence to the stated aims and objectives. Indeed, the attempt to define specific learning outcomes has led to a revival in the interest in Bloom's 'Taxonomy of Objectives' (1956) as academic programme planners prepare for QAA review (Ecclestone, 1999).

Fitness for purpose requires that the product or service fulfils a customer's needs, requirements or desires. These requirements should be clearly articulated by the customer (Rowley, 1996). Programme specifications are the major means of providing relevant information for prospective students and employers (QAAHE, 2001a) so that they can judge whether their needs and requirements are likely to be met. In higher education, teaching quality is concerned with teaching effectiveness and teaching efficiency. Teaching effectiveness is linked to the meeting of course aims and objectives: teaching efficiency to the resources that are used in order to meet the stated aims and objectives (Williams and Loder, 1990).

Newby (1999) claims that utilitarian and standardising approaches to quality management identify specific, disaggregated purposes of higher education and then endeavour to "measure" the fitness for these purposes. Similarly, Greatrix (2001) argues that QAA's belief that the drive for standardisation of higher education institutions' academic programmes is a means of assuring standards is essentially an industrial model that is inappropriate for higher education. An understanding of this perceived trend towards greater standardisation in higher education is aided by reference to the notion of McDonaldisation (Ritzer, 1993, 1996). Ritzer's thesis is that western societies are being characterised by a desire for rationality, efficiency,

predictability and control. McDonaldisation is the process by which McDonalds fast-food restaurant principles are applied to a wide range of production activities and service provision. Ritzer argues that HEIs are no different from other service industries and consumers require the same standardisation, reliability and predictability in terms of higher education provision as they do when purchasing a burger meal or dealing with their bank. This leads to the notion of the “McUniversity”. Harvey (1999) identifies this consumerist and instrumental perspective in higher education institutions and Scott (1998) claims that the recent massification of higher education in the United Kingdom has confirmed higher education as just another “mass production industry”.

Pirsig (1976), in his seminal book “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance”, discerns a continuum in quality management ranging from objective to subjective perspectives. He uses the analogy of the motorcycle maintenance handbook as the mechanistic, objective approach to quality management and motorcycle riding as the more discursive, subjective perception of quality. Perhaps the QAA subject review handbook and the academic programme specifications are the higher education equivalent of the motor cycle handbook and the McDonald’s specifications and procedures for franchisees. Franklin (1992) argues that the narrower definition of quality as fitness for purpose derives largely from the manufacturing sector.

Quality as value for money

The notion of accountability is central to this definition of quality with accountability being predicated upon the need for restraint in public expenditure in order that Britain can remain competitive in world markets (Harvey and Knight, op. cit.). Overall, higher education in the United Kingdom has an annual turnover of approximately £11 billion (HEFCE, 1999). Public services are expected to be accountable to their funders and, in the higher education sector these include the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), the Health Authorities and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) who contribute to student fees. Thus, accountability in terms of assuring value for money is generally to the government through the HEFCE, TTA, LEAs and the Health Authorities. However, where there is self-funding, accountability is directly to the student.

McNay (1995) and Tapper and Palfreyman (1998) trace the move from “collegial academy to corporate enterprise” during the last thirty years. McNay (op. cit.) notes the gradual erosion of significant academic autonomy and professional self-determination as the government, the principal funder of higher education and proxy for the taxpayer, is concerned to receive value for money. Successive Conservative central governments were steadfast in their view that generally HEIs were wasteful, inefficient and very slow to react to exhortations for the adoption of private sector management practices and greater inter-university and inter-college competition. The government was challenging the twin traditional notions of self-governance and collegiality (Miller, 1998) and was concerned to assert control and align higher education to the national economic interest (Greatrix, op. cit.). The academic and financial difficulties at Thames Valley University in 1998 have helped to justify central government’s apprehension about quality in higher education and whether it is receiving value for money consistently (Tysome, 1998).

Quality can be assessed in terms of return on investment or expenditure. If the same outcome is achieved at a lower cost then, as a consequence, the customer has a quality product or service (Rowley, op.cit.). With the fall in higher education funding per student in England from just under £5,600 in 1993/4 to £4,700 in 1997/8 and a planned reduction to approximately £4,600 in 2001/2 (THES, 2001a), this represents a quality service being provided at good value for money for the government and the taxpayer. This does assume that there is no reduction in quality and QAA subject reviews suggest that this has not happened (THES, 2001b).

Randall (2001) believes that the parents of current and prospective higher education students will expect value for money to be demonstrated clearly. They are used to seeing published 'league tables' relating to schools and hospitals, for example, and they are likely to expect the same for higher education.

However, Rowland (2001) is concerned that higher education in England and Wales has become obsessed with narrow measures of accountability, standardisation and managerial control. Also, Thorne and Cuthbert (1996) consider that the notion of value for money in the higher education sector is far more complex and ambiguous because, in addition to the customers paying fees (directly or indirectly) for help towards achieving a particular award, they may also be offered personal and intellectual growth. However, this requires that the customers supply high levels of motivation and commitment in addition to the money.

Quality as transformation

Quality can be considered in broader terms by taking a transformative approach. Transformation involves a change in form from one state to another, just as water can be transformed into ice (Harvey and Knight, op. cit.). This is very much the subjective and reflective Zen approach to quality (Pirsig, op. cit.). The transformation in education often involves cognitive transcendence with the provider 'doing something to the customer rather than just doing something for the customer' (Harvey and Green, op. cit., p. 24).

To achieve this transformation, Bradley (1994, p. 13) argues that:

... the flames of inquiry, tolerance and excellence require hard cash and supportive education policies. Innovative research needs money; university staff and students need accommodation, library resources and laboratory equipment. Everyone needs time, a commodity that is being squeezed out of the system by the increasing bureaucratic and financial demands imposed by government education policies.

Gibbs (op.cit.) regards current government education policies to be most unhelpful for the development of a transformative approach to quality because, in addition to the falling unit of resource (THES, 2001a), intrinsic educational values are being overshadowed by extrinsic market forces – a trend encouraged as early as 1987 by the Croham Report. Consequently, there is now greater emphasis on employability skills rather than critical reflection.

Peters (1992) claims that if you can't measure it, you can't improve it. The "measurement" of intellectual capital, a major outcome from higher education, is problematic and not easily gauged (Newby, op. cit.) and such problems mean that it is difficult to frame appropriate learning outcomes or include them as part of 'level descriptors'.

Quality as transformation, unlike quality as fitness for purpose, does not lend itself to the atomisation of clearly stated purposes because the achievement of knowledge and the satisfaction of the mind are holistic (Harvey and Knight, op. cit.). In Higher Education, the service the lecturer provides for the student is less clear-cut because the development of learning is rather more open-ended than the service provided in the "fast-food" restaurant. It is also a relationship where, unusually, the consumer is subject to criticism from the service provider. This criticism is in the form of regular academic assessment (Barnett, 1992). In addition, as Pring (1992) points out, learning is an incremental process and not something that can be defined in absolute terms. With knowledge being acquired slowly over a period of time, it is sometimes difficult to be sure when and how it has developed.

Senior managers' interpretations of quality

At the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000, the author invited senior managers (pro-vice-chancellors, vice principals, deans and academic registrars, for example) in a wide variety of higher education institutions to respond to a series of questions on quality. In one section of the questionnaire they were asked to allocate 100 points amongst four of Harvey and Green's definitions of quality. They allocated the points in order to reflect their view about what quality in higher education should mean. One hundred and eight managers of those approached (43.2%) replied and the results are shown in the pie chart (Figure 1).

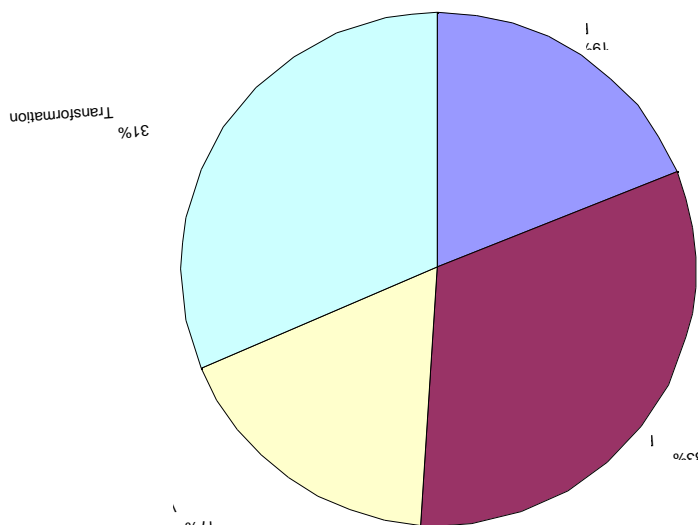


Figure 1: Senior managers' perceptions of quality, 1999–2000

Fitness for purpose was the definition that received the most support, closely followed by transformation. Excellence and value for money received far lower ratings with the latter being the least popular definition with the sample of senior managers in a wide range of higher education institutions.

Conclusion

If one regards quality to be largely a matter of excellence, then massification has been considered by some academics as reducing quality with 'more meaning worse'. If quality is seen largely as fitness for purpose, which was the case with many of the respondents in the survey of one hundred and eight senior managers in higher education institutions, then quality is clearly not at an end as it is being measured regularly through QAA subject reviews. Although there will be a 'lighter touch' from the change in methodology for Academic Review from December 2001, nevertheless fitness for purpose will continue to provide the quality framework with reviewers comparing their perceptions with the institution's stated broad aims of the provision (QAAHE, 2000b)

Quality as value for money does not seem to be a popular concept with the university and college senior managers in the sample but it is very much part of John Randall's interpretation. He considers that the publishing of quality measures of higher education is essential if parents and students are to judge which higher education institutions represent good value for their annual fee of £1,050. However, problems of measuring quality as transformation may well mean this interpretation has relatively little impact, even though it was popular with senior managers in the sample. These problems with measurement can often lead to quality measures tending to concentrate on what you can count rather than on what counts (Seddon, op. cit.).

Overall, during the period of massification, quality as fitness for purpose and as value for money have been the main interpretations by HEFCE and QAA. Thus, it can be argued that quality in these terms is far from dead. Indeed, it would appear to be alive and well despite the recent attacks on QAA and its methodology by certain senior academics in some of the Russell group universities (THES, 2001c; THES, 2001d). To the disappointment of many academics, the decline of collegial academy with the emergence of corporate enterprise in higher education institutions and the drive for greater standardisation and the desire for measurable outcomes have meant that quality as transformation is in a far less healthy state. As for quality as excellence, it is difficult to be sure. The continuing concerns over 'more means worse' suggest that excellence is still a popular interpretation of quality with some academic members of staff.

With the massification in higher education and all the 'supercomplexity' of higher education institutions (Barnett, 2000) and all the difficulties of defining and measuring quality, gauging quality from the operation of the market in higher education has some attraction in terms of its simplicity. As Professor Barron of the University of Southampton put it in a letter to the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (Barron, 1999 p.13):

Call me old-fashioned, but if students want to come, and employers want to employ them, then that's quality in my book. And if QAA doesn't agree, then sod [sic] the QAA.

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