

EPISTEMOLOGY OF QUALITY

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Abstract

The paper is an epistemological analysis of quality, standards and quality assurance. A positivist, phenomenological and critical epistemological framework is used to explore the interrelationships between quality, standards and purposes and approaches to quality assurance. The paper concludes with an embryonic analysis of the implementation and impact of quality from an epistemological perspective.

Introduction

This paper begins a process of examining the underlying epistemological relations between quality, standards and quality assurance. It outlines the nature of the epistemological framework being used, examines the purposes and approaches to quality assurance, examines different conceptions of quality and differentiates them from notions of standards. The paper specifies the interrelationships between quality, standards and purposes and approaches to quality assurance and then examines specific nodes to draw out the epistemological underpinning. This in itself is a relatively unusual examination but the paper also draws out, in embryo, the implementation and impact implications from the epistemological analysis. A later stage, and one not attempted in this paper, is to identify the learning theories that articulate with the epistemological analysis of quality.

Epistemology

There are different ways of classifying epistemological perspectives in the social sciences and no way has universal agreement. Drawing on well-established analyses of the theory of the nature of knowledge, the following tri-partite framework is used: positivism, phenomenology and critical-dialectical understanding.

Positivism

Positivism encompasses our taken-for-granted view of scientific knowledge. It asserts that science *explains* the observable world through identifying cause-and-effect relationships. Positivism assumes that we only know about something if we can apprehend it through our senses and explain what caused it.

The positivist approach is widely used in social science, taking various forms including attempts to provide causal laws, identifying possible causal factors and testing theoretical statements against observable evidence. The presumption is that cause-and-effect science is objective and value-free.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology asserts that we know social processes if we can *interpret* what they *mean*. Phenomenology, unlike positivism, sees the study of the social world as fundamentally different to the study of the natural world. This is because the social world is made up of acting, thinking subjects whose actions require interpretation. People are not things, they think and reflect on what they do. The social world has meaning for social actors. Thus, to know the social world, it is necessary to discover these meanings.

Phenomenological methodology is concerned with interpreting the world rather than explaining it. Phenomenologists tend to reject the idea that external truths about the social world can be exposed by using the methods of the natural sciences. Social actors cannot be treated as though their actions are mere reflexes of external causes: people are conscious and make decisions about how they will act.

Critical-dialectical

The critical-dialectical approach constructs alternative, situated, *understandings* of the social world. It attempts to go beneath surface appearance by questioning taken-for-granted views of the social world (Marx, 1887; Harvey, 1990). Critical social research is an alternative to positivistic and phenomenological approaches.

A critical-dialectical epistemological perspective argues that while it is important to see the social world as made up of reflective people it is also important to remember that they are situated in a specific historical and socio-economic context. To know the world we must look at how people are limited in what they do and think by the nature of the social world in which they live.

Critical-dialectical understanding does not come from breaking social events or structures down into causally-related component parts. On the contrary, understanding comes from seeing things as a whole and placing social events in their wider social and political setting. Nor does critical-dialectical understanding come from *interpreting* social interaction because, again, focussing on the process of interaction without taking the wider context into account is too limited.

Critical-dialectical understanding comes about by deconstructing prevailing knowledge, preconceptions and ideology and reconstructing an alternative understanding. The critique of ideology is not value neutral and critical-dialectical analysis engages with politics.

These three epistemological positions embody different positions on objectivity. Positivism argues that only 'objective' knowledge counts as scientific knowledge; phenomenology and critical dialectical understanding accept the theory-laden nature of observation (Chalmers, 2004), which argues that the concept of objectivity is illusory because facts do not exist in isolation of theories that frame them.

Quality assurance purposes

Four purposes (or rationales (Harvey and Newton, 2005)) have been identified for external quality assurance in the higher education setting: accountability, control, compliance and improvement.

Accountability

Accountability is about institutions taking responsibility for the service they provide and the public money they spend. Accountability has been the dominant underlying rationale for introducing quality evaluation.

Higher education in most countries has to demonstrate its worth and to account for its use of public resources in the face of competition for state funds. This notion of accountability is compatible with the value-for-money definition of quality (see discussion of the concept of quality, below).

A second aspect of accountability is to students: assurance that the programme of study is organised and run properly, and that an appropriate educational experience is both promised and delivered. This accountability notion is consistent, when the focus is on service delivery, with a fitness-for-purpose definition of quality or, when linked to inputs to an excellence definition. When the focus is on the learning process, then it comes closer to a transformation definition of quality.

A third accountability purpose of quality evaluation procedures is the generation of public information that funders can use to aid funding allocation decisions and prospective students and graduate recruiters can use to inform choice. This accountability concern is commensurate with excellent definitions of quality when choice is based on hierarchical analysis and with fitness-for-purpose when based on appropriateness for a specific end, or on a transformation definition when based on suitability of delivery and learning environment.

Control

Control is about ensuring the integrity of the higher education sector, in particular making it difficult for poor or rogue providers to continue operating and making access to the sector dependent on the fulfilment of criteria of adequacy.

In many countries, especially those with a significant private sector, governments seek to control unrestrained growth in higher education in an increasingly unrestricted market (Harvey, 2002; Rosa and Amaral, 2005). They may do this via financial controls or ministerial decree but increasingly quality monitoring and accreditation are being used to restrict market-led expansion.

Linked to this is the perceived need to ensure the status and standing and legitimacy of higher education. External review is used to ensure that the principles and practices of higher education are not being eroded or flouted, thereby undermining the intrinsic quality of university-level education and research.

The control aspect of quality evaluation specifically addresses the comparability of standards: that is the standard or level of student academic or professional achievement, nationally and internationally. Attempts have been made to 'benchmark' academic standards including: externally-set and marked examinations; specification of the content of syllabuses; (threshold) descriptors of outcomes; external examiners to ensure inter-institutional comparability of awards. The use of external examiners, for example, is well established in some countries as a means of making comparisons between programmes within subject disciplines.

Compliance

Compliance is ensuring that institutions adopt procedures, practices and policies that are considered by funders and governments to be desirable for the proper conduct of the sector and to ensure its quality. Government expectations include various forms of compliance that go beyond financial accountability and include the achievement of policy objectives. Governments place increasing emphasis on securing specified outputs and outcomes from publicly-funded activities in response to community expectations about improving service quality and policy effectiveness (PA Consulting, 2000).

There are other stakeholders who seek compliance through quality monitoring, notably professional or regulatory bodies who may use quality monitoring to check that their preferences or policies are being acknowledged or implemented. At its simplest level, quality monitoring has encouraged, or even forced, compliance in the production of information, be it statistical data, prospectuses, or course documents.

In addition, there is pressure to ensure comparability of provision and procedures, within and between institutions, including international comparisons.

Improvement

The *improvement* purpose, sometimes also referred to as enhancement, is less about constraint and more about the encouragement of adjustment and change. Most systems of external review claim to encourage improvement, however it has been a secondary feature of most systems, especially at the initial stage. As systems move into second or third phases, the improvement element has been given more attention. (Sweden and Finland are unusual in starting with improvement).

However, do external quality assurance processes set out to improve academic or research quality? Or is the aim to improve standards? Is the purpose to directly improve the student experience or is it to improve the way the institution monitors its own

activities? Or is improvement about transparency and the provision of programme documentation and outcomes information?

The improvement function of quality assurance procedures is normally about encouraging institutions to reflect upon their practices, with a view to enabling a process of continuous improvement of the learning process and the range of outcomes.

Quality assurance approaches

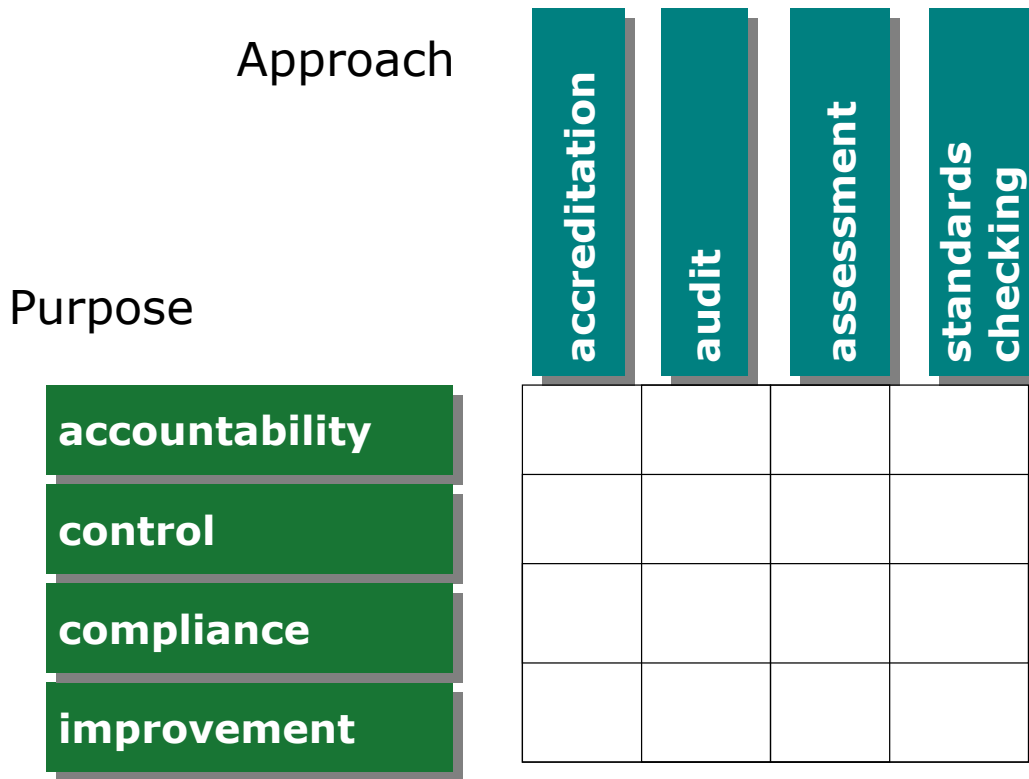
There are four broad types of quality assurance processes although the methods adopted extensively overlap. The four are accreditation, audit, assessment and standards checking. The distinction between the first three are well rehearsed (see Harvey, 2004–6), the latter category, for this paper, includes external examination of academic achievement or professional competence and performance indicators or student evaluations of service provision (see discussion on standards, below).

It should be noted that the processes of quality assurance are quite separate from the concept of quality. Quality is to quality assurance what intelligence is to IQ tests. Quality, in higher education is, for example, about the nature of learning. Quality assurance is about convincing others about the adequacy of that processes of learning. However, when the term quality is mentioned in higher educational circles it is often taken as shorthand for quality assurance processes. This unhelpful conflation is reproduced in the UNESCO definition of quality in higher education:

Quality (Academic): Quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and objectives, as well as to specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline. (Vlăsceanu *et al.*, 2004, p. 46)

The four purposes and the four broad approaches to quality assurance intersect (Diagram 1) providing 16 potential alternatives (space prohibits examination of these here).

Diagram 1: Quality assurance purposes and approaches



Quality

Although there tends to be an aversion in the quality literature to the definition of quality (although not its measurement!), to make headway on exploring the epistemology of quality and its relationship to learning it is necessary to examine the various definitions of quality and to distinguish them from standards and from so-called quality standards. The analysis in ‘Defining Quality’ (Harvey and Green, 1993), which has been widely quoted and adapted, is updated in ‘Understanding Quality’, a contribution for the Bologna Handbook (Harvey, 2006). These definitions, briefly reprised below (Table 1), are used to examine the epistemological basis of quality.

Definitions of quality

Table 1: Definitions of quality and standards.

<i>Quality</i>	<i>Definition</i>
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.
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.
Fitness for purpose	Judges quality in terms of the extent to which a 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).

	<i>NB: There are some who suggest that 'fitness of purpose' is a definition of quality but it is a specification of parameters of fitness and not itself a definition of the quality concept.</i>
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.
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.
<i>Standards</i>	
Academic standards	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 effective scholarship or produce new knowledge, which is assessed via peer recognition.
Standards of competence	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.
Service standards	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. <i>Post hoc</i> measurement of customer opinions (satisfaction) is used as indicators of service provision. Thus, service standards in higher education parallel consumer standards.
Organisational standards	Attainment of formal recognition of systems to ensure effective management of organisational processes and clear dissemination of organisational practices.

Source: adapted from Harvey, 1995m © Lee Harvey, 2007

Quality as exceptional or as excellence

The first notion of quality sees it as something special or exceptional. There are three variations on this.

First, a traditional notion of quality that implies exclusivity. Quality is based on an assumption that distinctiveness or inaccessibility of, for example, an élite Oxbridge education is of itself 'quality'. Quality is apodictic, not judged against any criteria. The traditional concept provides no definable means of determining quality. Where it assured at all it is through devices such as reputational league tables (such as, *Times Higher Education Supplement* international rating tables).

Second, exceeding high standards or excellence. Excellence is often used interchangeably with quality. Unlike the traditional notion excellence provides (input and output) benchmarks against which 'high' standards can be evaluated. This is not to say the benchmark standards are objective but they have the potential to specify the components of excellence. Assuring excellent academic standards can only be done through a system of standards monitoring, such as an external examiner system or a peer process, such as a research assessment exercise or direct assessment of teaching (usually resisted). Student feedback might provide an indirect measure of the latter. In practice, assuring exceptional service standards tends to be input driven, with an assumption that good facilities and well-qualified staff will result in good service to students.

Third, checking standards: rather than difficult to attain, the checks are based on attainable criteria that are designed to ensure minimum standards. This corresponds with

what have been described as ‘threshold definitions’ of quality, or in some cases, ‘benchmark quality’ (implying minimum benchmarks rather than the ‘excellence benchmarks’ discussed above) or minimum ‘quality standards’. The threshold standards approach to quality implies that quality is improved if thresholds are raised. Accreditation schemes are intended to provide a judgement on threshold standards: either existing or potential.

Quality as perfection or consistency

Quality as perfection or consistency involves a shift from outcome standards measurement to process standards, with a focus on reliability. There are two aspects to this: *zero defects* and *quality culture*.

The zero defects approach to quality replaces the emphasis on exclusivity with one that makes quality accessible for all (Halpin, 1966, Crosby, 1979). Quality is defined as conformance to specification, which requires outcomes to be delivered consistently. Arguably, zero defects approach requires a quality culture where everyone takes responsibility for quality and strives to prevent errors at each stage of the process rather than detect errors at a final inspection stage.

It has been suggested that this approach to quality has no relevance to higher education because there is no intention to produce identical graduates or research outcomes. However, there is a need to have flawless information systems and reliable and consistent student grading and research assessment processes, not to mention reliable student support services.

Quality as perfection/consistency turns quality into a relative concept. There are no absolutes against which the output can be assessed, no universal benchmarks; quality is gauged by consistency of specified provision. The underlying quality culture reflects the idea of delegated responsibility. A quality culture requires a facilitative managerial infrastructure alongside a trusting delegation of the academic process and its support to those who directly engage with students or undertake front-line research.

There is little formal attempt to evaluate or assure consistency in provision in higher education as this tends to apply mostly to service and organisational standards rather than academic ones. A key mechanism for evaluating or assuring consistency in student grading or learning support is feedback from students and staff. Quality audit or assessment processes indirectly address the consistency of student grading, although this is not a principal task. Audit may also comment on the reliability of administrative process. In essence, the assuring of consistency is in the hands of staff and students.

Consistency of organisational standards is quality assured through mechanisms such as ISO9000 or similar certification, which focus on the codification of processes to ensure that errors are not made.

Quality as fitness for/of purpose

Quality is also defined as fitness for purpose of a product or service. Fitness for purpose equates quality with the fulfilment of a specification or stated outcomes. Quality is thus judged by the extent to which the product or service fits a stated purpose.

Although apparently straightforward in conception, ‘fitness for purpose’ is deceptive (Moodie, 1986), for it raises the issues of ‘whose purpose?’ and ‘how is fitness assessed?’ For some, the objectives are set externally and fitness for purpose becomes compliance. For others, the purpose is a more contentious issue and the notion of fitness *of* purpose has been introduced to evaluate whether the quality-related intentions of an organisation are adequate.

Where fitness *for* purpose opened up the possibility of inclusive quality, as every product and service has the potential to fit its purpose and thus be a quality product or service, fitness *of* purpose closed down inclusivity, as there are external determinants of what is acceptable as a quality criterion. Fitness of purpose is not used as a definition of quality as it simply specifies the purpose rather than engages with the quality concept.

Broadly, fitness for purpose offers two alternative priorities for specifying purpose. The first puts the onus on the customer, and is concerned with meeting customer specifications. Higher education tends to avoid this approach. Instead, it adopts a mission-based fitness for purpose which links specification to institutional mission. Mission-based fitness for purpose reflects approaches that see quality as about anticipating needs.

Fitness for purpose of academic standards is assured through quality assessment procedures. In theory, this is done by the institution demonstrating it fits either externally-prescribed standards (such as those specified by a regulatory or professional body) or its own objectives, as specified, for example, in its values and mission statement. Fitness for purpose of academic standards is also judged, indirectly, through accreditation schemes, which again assure minimum compliance to externally-imposed standards, such as those prescribed by a professional body. In all of this, there is no direct attempt to fit student requirements; students as customer are presumed to be well served by the mediators of fitness *of* purpose, viz. professional bodies, quality assurance agencies or government departments.

Fitness-for-purpose-based quality assurance approaches are designed to evaluate institutional mission fulfilment but despite the intention, all quality assurance systems have an overlay of generic requirements. In short, the institution or programme is not solely judged on its ability to fulfil its mission but on whether it complies with national, governmental, disciplinary, professional or other (threshold) expectations.

Standards

There are four realms of standards in higher education: academic, competence, service, and organisational (Table 1). They relate to different conceptions of quality and there are preferred approaches for each node (Table 2)

Table 2: Relationship between quality and standards in higher education and means of assurance (items in parentheses are indirect assurance mechanisms)

<i>Standards</i>	<i>Academic standards</i>	<i>Standards of competence</i>	<i>Service standards</i>	<i>Organisational standards</i>
<i>Quality</i>				
Exceptional	Emphasis on summative assessment of knowledge and, implicitly, some 'higher-level' skills. Implicit normative gold standard. Comparative evaluation of research output. Élitism: 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.	Clear role hierarchy reflecting academic status and experience. Often a heavy emphasis on 'traditional values'. Strong emphasis on autonomy and academic freedom. Aversion to transparency.
	Assured by: Standards monitoring Research assessment Teacher assessment (Accreditation)	Assured by: Standards monitoring Professional accreditation	Assured by: Accreditation (Performance indicators)	Assured by: Institutional Accreditation (Audit of quality processes)
Perfection or consistency	A target level of academic standard is consistently achieved (year on year).	Expectation of a minimum prescribed level of professional competence. Problem in assessing for 'zero defects'.	Primarily relates to reliable and consistent student grading and to administrative processes, such as accuracy and reliability of record keeping, timetables, coursework arrangements.	Right first time. Document procedures, regulations and good practice. Obtain ISO9000 certification.
	Assured by: (Standards monitoring)	Assured by: Standards monitoring (Accreditation)	Assured by: Participant/user feedback (Audit) (Assessment)	Assured by: External QM certification (Accreditation)
Fitness for purpose (Fitness of purpose)	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. This is similar to excellence approaches to checking minimum standards.	The purpose involves the provision of a service. Thus, process is assessed via (minimum) standards for the purpose — usually teaching competence, the link between teaching and research, student support (academic and non-academic), other facilities. Purpose is, for students, often judged against expectations.	Ensure appropriate mechanisms in place to assess whether practices and procedures fit the stated mission-based purposes.
	Assured by: Assessment (Accreditation)	Assured by: Standards monitoring (Accreditation Subject assessment)	Assured by: Customer charters/ surveys (Accountability audit) (Assessment) (Accreditation)	Assured by: Institutional accountability audit
Value for money	Maintenance or improvement of academic outcomes (graduate standards and research output) for the same (or declining) unit of resource. That is, ensure greater efficiency. Concern that efficiency gains work in the opposite direction to quality improvement. Provide students with an academic experience	Maintain or improve the output of 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	Customer satisfaction analyses (student, 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.	Relies heavily on periodic or <i>ad hoc</i> reviews of whether organisational structure is effective and efficient, often informed by management information (especially basic output statistics).

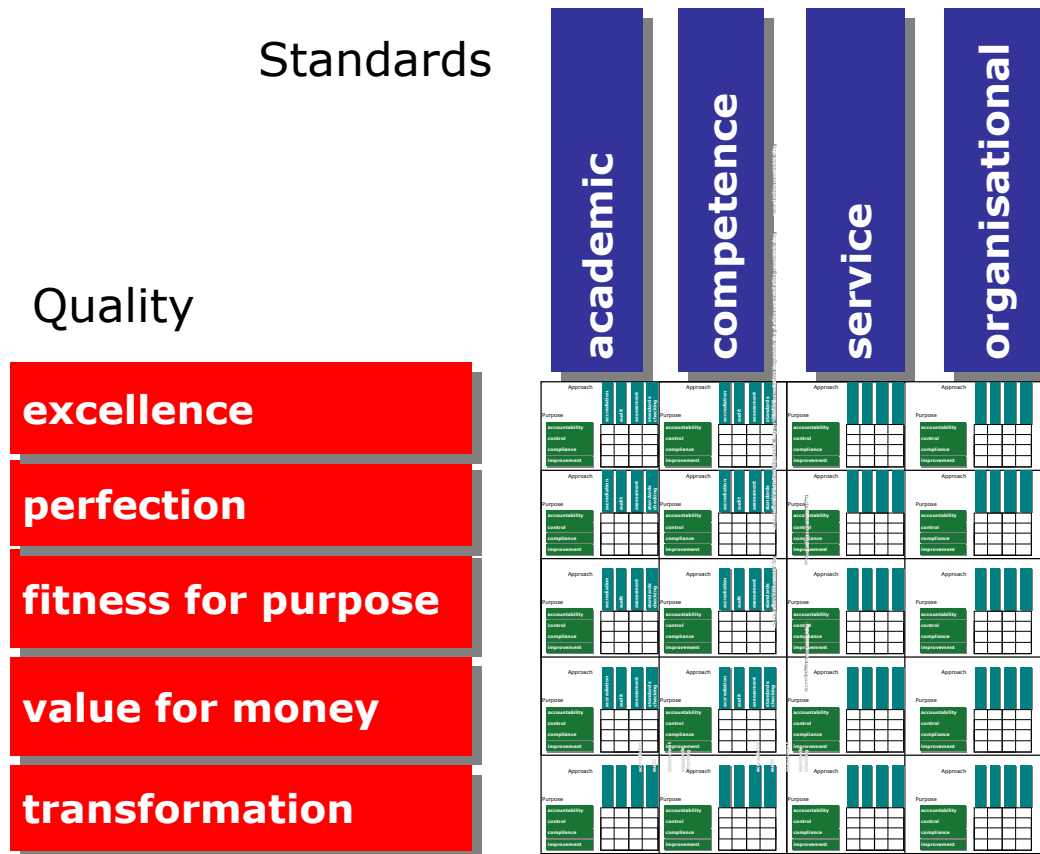
	(qualification, training, personal development) to warrant the investment.	advancement, which ensures a return on investment.		
	Assured by: Performance indicators Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	Assured by: Performance indicators Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	Assured by: Customer surveys and charters (Performance indicators)	Assured by: (Institutional accountability audit) (Performance indicators)
Transformation	Assessment of students' acquisition of transformative knowledge and skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation) against explicit objectives. Focus on adding value rather than gold standards. As transformation includes empowerment, formative as well as summative assessment is required. Transformative research standards are assessed on their <i>impact</i> 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 <i>and</i> the acquisition of transformative abilities.	Emphasis on organisational structure that encourages dialogue, team working and, ultimately, empowerment of the learner. Delegated responsibility for quality and standards. Innovation, responsiveness and 'trust' are prominent.
	Assured by: Value added performance indicators. (External examination) (Accreditation)	Assured by: Value added. Professional accreditation	Assured by: Participant feedback (Accreditation) (Assessment)	Assured by: Improvement audit

Source: Adapted from Harvey (1995), a version in Harvey, (2006) © Lee Harvey, 2007

A note on quality standards

Quality and standards are different: the former is essentially about process and the latter refer to the level (grading) of the outcome. 'Quality standards', so-called, are confusing because they are expected norms against which process quality and outcome standards are measured (as in the *European Standards and Guidelines*, (ENQA 2005)). The analogy would be a golf score. The way the player tackles the course would be the quality of the play, the number of strokes the player takes would be the standard and the par score for the course (the number of strokes a good player is expected to take) would be the quality standard.

Diagram 2: Quality and standards



Examples of epistemological underpinnings

Accountability for public money

As noted above, accountability for public money is a central aspect of quality assurance processes. Methods to ensure this revolve significantly, although not exclusively, around standards checking, through the use of performance indicators on issues such as retention and completion, graduate employment statistics and research assessment exercises, often linked to financial constraints or rewards and clearly highlighting value for money of the service provided and the academic and competence levels achieved. The value for money notion of quality is about getting as much as possible for a given expenditure or a specified amount by spending as little as possible. There is an underlying causal relationship: cutbacks and efficiency savings can reduce costs. For the academic this may be seen to result in poorer quality and thus outcomes, for the politician this results in the same outcomes and only the 'slack' in the system is removed. In either event, the analysis is fundamentally a cause-and-effect analysis

Compliance with professional requirements

Another aim of quality assurance is to ensure that professional standards are maintained. This, in effect, involves compliance with professional body (or other organisation's) requirements or norms, usually relating to the competence of graduates. A preferred mode of checking this is accreditation, usually with a focus on inputs, such as facilities, curricula and staffing, sometimes supported by a history of appropriate outputs. Again, this is underpinned by a positivist epistemology, an explicit view that complying with requirements will result in competent graduates, a process that can be checked through measurable, observable variables.

Compliance with quality assurance agency requirements

Although quality assurance agencies set out requirements of the assurance process, the intention is initially to be helpful and guide institutions through the process of self-reflection and review, with the purpose, as has been shown of making institutions accountable, controlling activities, complying to government requirements or improving the learning and research. Compliance to the agency requirements themselves is not a fundamental purpose of quality assurance but evolves into a process in its own right, sometimes overshadowing the underlying purposes. The audit or assessment process, for example, designed to explore the fitness-for-purpose of the academic processes involves certain steps, which in the main are additional to, and sometimes do not mesh well with, the normal academic practice. The result has often been a peripheral engagement in the process by academic staff and students, characterised by performance and 'game playing'. The process can be demotivating and perceived as burdensome or, in some cases, by encouraging well-structured self-reflection can be motivating and inspiring. In any event, the quality assurance requirements and its implementation depend on the meanings that key actors attach to the process. As such, compliance with agency requirements is phenomenological.

Improvement of learning: empowering learners

One aspect of quality assurance is improvement of the learning process. When this is informed by a transformation view of quality with radical views of learner-focused or autonomous learning, then the role and nature of the teacher and the privileged position of discipline knowledge starts to be deconstructed. This also moves to the hazy hinterland of quality assurance processes as none of the existing systems does more than nod in the direction of transformative learning. Not surprisingly, quality assurance processes are uncomfortable with this fundamentally critical-dialectical approach because there are no simple indicators, no self-evident or taken-for-granted and easily assimilated criteria for judging how students are empowered as critical reflective learners.

Why bother?

Apart from identifying that there is a myriad of different intersections of quality,

standards, quality assurance purposes and approaches, why is examining the epistemological basis of quality important.

First, it reveals the fundamental underlying differences in quality issues. Quality and quality assurance are not homogeneous and, for example, a fitness-for-purpose approach is not adequate, nor even appropriate, for evaluating many quality issues. What an epistemological analysis does, as hinted at by the examples, is to draw attention to the way that we construct quality as knowledge. It differentiates reductionist causal explanations from interpretation of meanings of actors from socio-historically specific deconstructed and reconstructed alternative understandings.

Second, these diffuse perspectives also have a bearing on the implementation process, which ultimately transforms policy into practice. Without wanting to be overly prescriptive, there is a tendency for positivist approaches to be associated with top-down implementation procedures. Similarly, phenomenology is characterised by bottom-up procedures and critical-dialectical by iterative approaches to implementation.

All of this is further reflected in the impact of quality assurance. There is little enough impact analysis but most of it, not surprisingly, implicitly adopts a positivist model. Impact is equated with cause and effect. Not only are there severe methodological problems of identifying causal factors, there are fundamental epistemological debates about relevance of a reductionist causal model as against a phenomenological approach or a critical-dialectical one. This is compounded by trying to link the above analysis to learning theory: an issue that was hinted at in the final example above but which is beyond the scope of this introductory paper.

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