



Quality in Higher Education

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**REPORT
on the
QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION
PROJECT**

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ASSESSING QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION - A TRANSBINARY RESEARCH PROJECT

The Higher Education Context

Extensive changes have taken place in higher education in the United Kingdom. Polytechnics have been awarded university status and will no longer be funded as a separate sector. Single funding councils have been established in England, Scotland and Wales responsible for *all* the higher education in their respective areas. Quality of educational provision will be a major factor in the distribution of funds. Assessment of the quality of higher education has thus become an important issue.

The Background to the Project

The three year *QHE* Project was launched in January 1991 following a conference on quality at The University of Central England in Birmingham (formerly Birmingham Polytechnic). The *QHE* project is funded by a consortium of education, government and industry¹. Each sponsor is represented on the Project Steering Committee.

The project is directed by Dr. Diana Green, Director of Academic Planning at University of Central England in Birmingham. During the first year of the project there were two full-time research fellows: Dr. Lee Harvey and Ms. Alison Burrows.

The project aims to develop a methodology for assessing quality in higher education. As a first stage, it set out to establish what is meant by quality in higher education and how it might be assessed. The primary focus of interest is the quality of teaching and learning. The first stage of the research focused on the identification of the criteria which different stakeholder groups regard as important in assessing quality in higher education.

An underlying aim of the project is to inform policy. Four aspects were identified as critical in this respect. First, any assessment methodology will need to provide information that will satisfy demands for public accountability. Second, it will need to be credible in the eyes of the academic community. Third, it will need to be practically feasible. Fourth, it will need to take into account other developments in higher education, such as quality audit.

We have set out to democratise quality by asking students, teaching staff, non-teaching staff and employers what they think are the important criteria for quality. These have been compared to the views of other stakeholders: accrediting agencies, quality assurers, quality assessors and the government.

Quality

The *QHE* project has constantly sought to balance theoretical enquiry into the nature of quality with a pragmatic, empirical exploration of how quality judgements are made in practice in the higher education context.

There are a number of ways of viewing quality. Traditionally, quality has been linked to the idea of exceptionally high standards. A second approach to quality sees it in terms of consistency. It 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. A third approach to quality relates it to fitness for purpose. In this approach, quality is judged in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose. A fourth approach to quality equates it with value for money. At the heart of the value for money approach is the notion of accountability. Public services, including education, are expected to be accountable to the funders. A fifth view of quality sees quality as transformative. 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.

Given the difficulties in defining quality in higher education, some commentators have adopted a pragmatic approach. Quality is thus 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 used by each interest group when judging quality and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken.

The project has adopted a 'stakeholder' approach to quality. Various stakeholder groups have been identified ranging from students and staff through accreditors and assessors to employers and the government. The aim is to find out the views on quality of each of these groups.

Methodology

The empirical research used several methods. Employers' views were sought via a short quantitative questionnaire on graduate recruitment and through qualitative discussions in employer seminars. Student and staff views were explored using a large scale, extensive questionnaire. The views of government, funding agencies, quality assessors and assurers involved an extensive review of documentary material and in-depth interviews with key personnel.

Employers

We have undertaken a survey of employers, focussing primarily on education outputs. This was paralleled by in-depth interviews and discussion seminars among representatives of large public and commercial employers.

The preliminary results of the employers' seminars and questionnaire showed that, for most employers, the extent to which higher education helps to provide an appropriately educated work force is central in judging quality.

Broadly speaking employers have two requirements of graduate recruits: 'subject specific' knowledge and skills and 'transferable' knowledge skills and attitudes. Most employers in the seminars agreed that too little attention is given to the development of transferable skills in higher education but opinions differ about what is the appropriate balance between transferable skills and subject-specific knowledge. The questionnaire respondents made it very clear that the most important qualities were 'effective communication' and 'team work' with subject specific knowledge rated as the least important of 15 different knowledge, skills and attitude criteria.

The questionnaire data has also been analysed by sector (manufacturing, service, government) and by size. Although some variation occurred, the predominant view reflects a concern with 'transferable skills' rather than 'subject specialism' whatever the sector and size of organisation.

While too much emphasis is placed on subject specific knowledge and skills in higher education at present, employers warned that a swing too far the other way was equally inappropriate.

Most employers agree that, in the long term, they will need a more highly educated work force. The current expansion in the numbers of students entering higher education is therefore welcomed although there is some concern that insufficient funding to underpin the expansion may lead to an overall drop in standards. Many employers are also concerned that the changes will lead to greater variation in the standards of courses which will be confusing for those recruiting graduates. Those present at the seminars were unanimous in wanting to maintain the current system of roughly comparable standards across the higher education system.

Employers tend to focus on inputs and process in judging the quality of research and training collaboration. Decisions to collaborate with a particular institution are often based on judgements about the quality of particular individuals or departments rather than criteria relating to the institution as a whole. Most important are a 'business-like' approach to negotiating contracts, a quick and effective response to enquiries, reliability and good presentation skills.

Employers are certainly looking for value for money when determining which institution to

collaborate with. Efficiency is therefore a criteria when judging quality.

Questionnaire respondents, surprisingly, given the often repeated claim that employers want to see more opportunities for 'life-long learning', rated continuing education as of relatively little importance. Research reputation of the institution was regarded as the least important criterion of all in judging quality.

Overall employers appeared to judge higher education on its ability to produce graduates with a mix of knowledge and skills that would both enable them to work effectively in a modern organisation and equip them for life-long learning.

Staff and students

We undertook a literature search to identify the quality criteria and measures currently in use by inspectors, funding councils accrediting agencies and the vice-chancellors' and directors' committees. This gave us the 'official' line on quality. To these we added the views of the two main higher education teachers' unions. Finally we used the research conducted by the Student Satisfaction Project at the University of Central England. From the review we identified around 300 possible criteria which we distilled down to around 100 distinct elements.

We drew up a questionnaire that took account of these. Following the pilot, it ended up with 111 criteria. Respondents were asked to rate each of the criteria on a scale ranging from 1 (the criterion is of no relevance in judging quality) to 4 (the criterion is absolutely essential).

The questionnaire has been used in 16 institutions. We received over 4000 replies. Three striking features emerge from the preliminary analysis. First, that there were very high levels of agreement between students, teaching staff and non-teaching staff as to the relative importance of the different criteria (correlation coefficients of 0.9).

Second, although there were clear priorities among the criteria, none were seen as completely irrelevant. This was not altogether surprising given that all items have been regarded as important by one agency or another.

Third, the most highly rated items are not the ones that are often presumed to be rated as most important. Teaching, for example, is given less prominence than resourcing and programme aims and assessment. Similarly, some criteria often assumed to be important in assessing quality such as research profile, entry standards and output indicators were seen as of relatively little importance.

The most important criteria are dominated by resource items relating directly to student learning experiences, specifically, library resources, access and staffing; access to information technology and adequate laboratories and workshops.

At the other end, high entry standards, good results, few failures and few withdrawals are seen as of relatively little importance. Some work and employer-related items (work experience, assessment in the work environment, and employers views in course reviews) are at the bottom, which does not encourage academic-employer collaboration. Similarly, collaboration with other education institutions is not seen as important.

The ability of an institution to secure research contracts and the publication of research by staff are given a low rating, which reflects the relatively low importance given to research in assessing the quality of higher education.

The results of the research on employers' perceptions are reflected in the low rating of the item 'the programme concentrates on providing specialist knowledge' and the high rating of the development of transferable skills such as communication and team working skills.

It appears that underlying the assessment of quality, for staff and students, is a concern with the student learning experience. This is not confined to the experience of the classroom but to the total learning experience. In consequence, aspects which have a direct impact on student experience such as library provision and feedback on assessed work are seen as having a higher priority than aspects seen to have an indirect impact such as staff research and publication, high entry standards and links to the world of work.

The Quality Assurers

The following general criteria for assessing quality emerge from an analysis of organisations primarily concerned with assuring quality. The system should produce sufficient graduates of comparable standards. Institutions should have clear missions, explicit quality assurance systems and be committed to improving quality. They should also have effective policies for improving access and for staff development. Programmes of study should have clear aims and objectives to which subject content relates. Teaching methods should reflect the varied needs of learners. Assessment methods should be valid, fair and criteria should be understood by staff and student. Programmes should be vocationally relevant and equip students with transferable skills.

The Government and the quality assessors

The latest position that the government, the funding councils and HMI take about quality assessment in higher education suggests the following concerns. Standards must be comparable and must be maintained. The system must be flexible enough to meet the needs of the economy. It should be able to respond to skills shortages and support life-long learning. Institutions should have a clear mission and effective links to employers. They must be efficient and effective in the use of public money while ensuring adequate resources for learning. Programmes must have clear aims and objectives. Teaching should be flexible and staff should perform well in classrooms. Students should be encouraged to be responsible for learning and leave the programme equipped for life-long learning. Assessment, from which students should receive useful feedback, should be valid and cover the full range of course aims.

The criteria

Ten items are endorsed as a priority by four or more of the stakeholder groups.

- There are adequate physical resources (library, workshops, IT) to support teaching and learning.
- There are adequate human resources to support teaching and learning (and staff are properly qualified).
- The programme has clear aims and objectives which are understood by staff and students.
- The subject content relates to the programme's aims and objectives.
- Students are encouraged to be actively involved in, and given responsibility for, learning.
- The standard of the programme is appropriate to the award.
- Assessment is valid, objective and fair.
- Assessment covers the full range of course aims and objectives.
- Students receive useful feedback from assessment (and are kept informed of progress).
- Students leave with transferable knowledge and skills.

Availability of reports

A summary report on the first year's work and separate reports on the employers' questionnaire and seminars, the staff-student questionnaire and a comprehensive literature review are available from Dr. Lee Harvey, *QHE*, University of Central England in Birmingham, Baker Building, Perry Barr, Birmingham, B42 2SU. Fax 021-331 6379

¹ The sponsors are: Apple Computer UK Ltd., Aston University, Bass Taverns Ltd., The University of Central England in Birmingham, The British Council, Business and Technician Education Council, Cadbury Schweppes, Plc., Centro, Committee of Directors of Polytechnics, Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals of Universities in the U.K., Confederation of British Industry, Council for Industry and Higher Education, Council for National Academic Awards, Department of Education and Science, Digital Equipment Co. Ltd., Economic and Social Research Council, Esso UK Plc., IBM UK Ltd., IMI Plc., Lucas Industries Plc., Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council, Price Waterhouse Management Consultants, J. Sainsbury Plc., SCOTVEC, Society for Research into Higher Education, Training Enterprise and Education Directorate, Unilever, Universities Funding Council, The University of Birmingham.