Defining Quality in Higher Education: the stakeholder approach

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Rising interest in quality in higher education - the last decade

During the last decade quality has become an important issue in higher education.   There have been two separate, but related reasons for this.

In the first place there has been a drive for greater accountability by the government for the way in which higher education spends the funds allocated to it.   Society is no longer prepared to take on trust that higher education is providing value for money and is asking higher education to demonstrate that it is spending public money efficiently and effectively. This parallels approaches to other public services, such as health (Cave et al, 1990).

In part, this demand for greater public accountability came from a sense that higher education had not been responding effectively to the needs of modern industrial society.   So, for example in the 1985 Green Paper 'The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s' it said

there is continuing concern that higher education does not respond sufficiently to changing needs.   This may be due in part to disincentives to change within higher education, including over-dependence on public funding, and to failures in communication between employers and institutions. (DES, 1985a)

and
The Government believes that it is vital for our higher education to contribute more effectively to the improvement of the performance of the economy (DES, 1985b)

The government's commitment to ensuring greater public accountability for public expenditure on higher education has continued throughout the 1980s. Its stance is demonstrated by the following extract from a letter from the Secretary of State to the Head of the PCFC

I shall however expect to see two key features. The first is a means of specifying clearly what polytechnics and colleges are expected to provide in return for public funds. The second is a systematic method of monitoring institutional performance. I attach particular importance to the latter, since without measures of performance, the Council will have the means neither of satisfying itself that institutions are providing what has been promised at acceptable quality, nor of making comparative assessments of institutions as a basis for future allocations of grant. (Baker, 1988)

This drive for greater accountability has not been restricted to the United Kingdom but should be viewed as part of an international trend.   Similar developments have occurred in many other countries   (Neave, 1988; Goedegebuure, 1990; Teather, 1990)

The second important development which has influenced the quality debate in higher education in the United Kingdom has been the move away from an elitist system of higher education towards one of mass participation without a corresponding increase in finances.   This reduction in the unit of resource in higher education, and the increase in numbers entering the higher education system, many without the traditional entry requirements, has led some to argue that quality must inevitably suffer.

The debate has gained added impetus by the publication in 1991 of the White Paper 'Higher Education - A New Framework' and the subsequent Bill on Further and Higher Education which was enacted in March 1992.   The new law heralded significant changes in the structure of higher education in the United Kingdom.   All of the polytechnics have been granted degree awarding powers and the Council for National Academic Awards, a major quality assurance body for the polytechnics and colleges sector, is to be wound up.   A single higher education funding council is to be established for England with similar arrangements for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.   The new legislation requires the funding council to establish a Quality Assessment Committee and to 'secure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education provided in institutions...' (Further and Higher Education Bill, 1992).   The institutions have been encouraged by the government to set up their own 'Quality and Access Organisation' to focus on the audit of quality assurance systems.

Defining quality - the 'stakeholder' approach

What is quality in higher education and how do you go about assessing it?   Quality is a concept, like 'freedom' or 'justice', of which people have and intuitive understanding but whose meaning they find difficult to articulate.   Does it mean the same to everybody or do people use the same word to mean very different things?   The QHE project looks at precisely these issues.

The QHE project was launched in September 1991. It is sponsored by a partnership of education, government and business. There are currently 27 sponsors in the United Kingdom including the Department of Education and Science, the funding councils, accrediting bodies, major employers, employers' organisations, higher education institutions, research and training organisations. It is independent of any single organisation or institution but its physical base is Birmingham Polytechnic.   Each of the sponsors is represented on the project steering group which meets about once every three months. Sponsors are expected to take an active part in determining the scope and development of the project.

The ultimate aim of the project is to develop a methodology for assessing quality in higher education.   However, before you can develop techniques for assessing something you have to be clear what it is that you are trying to assess.   The first year of the project , therefore, is being spent establishing a clear set of criteria for judging quality in higher education.

An underlying hypothesis for the first phase of the project is that quality in the context of higher education is a relative concept. Its definition varies according to:

-        which aspect or dimension of the higher education process is the focus of attention;
-        who is making the assessment;

-        the purpose for which the assessments are made.

In order to test this hypothesis the research team has identified a range of interest groups or 'stakeholders' in higher education, eight in all:

-        students;
-        employers;
-        'government', subdivided into ministerial departments (DES, DTI, DE etc);
-        funding councils;
-        teaching staff in higher education institutions
-        managerial staff in higher education institutions, including representative bodies such as CDP, CVCP, and administrative and support staff;
-        accrediting bodies (including the professions);
-        assessment bodies (e.g., HMI, the Audit Unit and the proposed new Assessment Unit).

Our aim is to find out the views on quality of each of these groups by looking at:

-        the focus of interest of each group. For example: is the focus on the input, process or output of higher education; is it on teaching or research?
-        the underlying definitions of quality used by the groups and their political and philosophical underpinnings.

The 'stakeholder' approach is an analytical tool which other researchers have also used to look at quality in higher education (Vroeijenstijn, 1991; Yorke, 1991).   Primarily, it has been used in the Netherlands to try and establish a set of performance indicators for assessing quality which would have wide credibility (Dochy, 1990).   The crucial difference between this research and our own is that, at this stage, we are not looking at indicators of quality but at the criteria for judging quality itself.   For example, we are trying to find out what constitutes teaching quality rather than how you might measure that teaching quality is present (which might be, for the sake of argument, looking at the degree classifications of graduates).

To use the 'stakeholder' approach effectively meant that there should be no assumptions about how a particular group might define quality or its main focus of interest.   The project does not concentrate specifically on the quality of teaching and learning or research or institutional quality.   Anything may be considered relevant.

At the end of the first stage of the project therefore, we aim to have a set of quality criteria, ranked inorder of preference, which reflect the views of all the stakeholders.   At one end of the spectrum each 'stakeholder' group might think about quality in a different way and its focus of attention might also be different.   More likely, however, there will be some convergence of views on particular issues.

Research Methods

A variety of methods is being used to find out the views of the stakeholders. These have been combined into three broad groups for practical purposes.

staff and students in higher education

A questionnaire based survey is being conducted covering sixteen institutions selected according to territorial, cultural and structural criteria. Within each institution, a representative stratified sample of students (approximately 400) and random sample of 400 staff (teaching and non-teaching) is being surveyed.

In order to design the questionnaire, we undertook a literature search to identify the quality criteria and measures currently in use by bodies such as HMI, PCFC, UFC, CDP, CVCP, CNAA, BTEC, NATFHE and the AUT.   Using the research conducted by the Student Satisfaction Project at Birmingham Polytechnic (Mazelan et al, 1991) and parallel work by the project team on employers' views, we added a further range of criteria until we had identified around 300. These we distilled down, by merging overlapping criteria, to around 100 different elements.

We then attempted to specify more clearly the 'definitions' of quality. 'Definition' is rather too grandiose and we reverted to the rather less precise 'ways of thinking about' quality. From this we identified 9.

Meeting the requirements of the student.
Enhancing the knowledge, abilities and skills of students.
Empowering students to effect changes in their education.
Fulfilling the stated intention (or mission) of the institution.
Providing mechanisms to ensure that students get what has been offered.
Striving for excellence in all aspects of the institution and programmes of study.
Making efficient   and cost effective use of educational resources.
Checking that standards have been met.
Providing a distinctive , special   and 'high class' education.

Staff and students are asked to indicate how important they think the criteria are for judging quality in higher education and which 'way of thinking about quality' seems most appropriate to them.


government, funding agencies, accrediting agencies

A review of published material has been conducted which will be followed up by interview-based verification.

employers

The following methods have been used:

-        interviews with organisations representing employers;
-        a short employer questionnaire;
-        two employer seminars.


Interviews with employer representatives on the steering group took place to help determine

what methods should be used to find out the views of employers about quality in higher education and the character of the employer questionnaire and seminars. This source was backed up with two in-depth interviews with organisations representing employers: the CBI and the Council for Industry and Higher Education.

As a result of the interviews conducted the research team reached the conclusion that a focused approach, concentrating specifically on the outputs of higher education relevant to employers, was most likely to yield results.

Higher education can be viewed as a process which has two main outputs: an educated workforce and research (Cave, 1991).   The research team has sought the views of employers on these outputs in two ways: a short questionnaire on graduate recruitment; and two seminars one focusing on quality in relation to an educated workforce and the other on quality in relation to research, consultancy and sponsorship etc.

The discussions during the two seminars have been drawn together to produce a position statement on employers' views on quality in higher education and a set of criteria for judging quality.   This paper will be supplemented with the results from the survey on graduate recruitment.

The project steering group

The project steering group provides another resource as the majority of stakeholder groups are represented. The project has been able to make use of the group, via discussions within meetings, depth-interviews with members and contacts with other key informants.

Future development of the project

During the second phase of the project some quality assessment techniques   will be tested within higher education institutions. The criteria identified in the first stage will be used to as a basis for developing quality indicators. A methodology will be developed incorporating these indicators. Although it is difficult to be clear about the methodology at this stage, it is likely that the research team will seek the cooperation of institutions to monitor and evaluate methods which are already being developed and used. In the case of those methods which are not currently being utilised in the UK higher education context, a selected number of institutions will be invited to take part in the testing and evaluation exercise.

It is likely that certain approaches to quality management, such as BS5750 and Total Quality Management, will also be evaluated.   The objective here will be to see whether these approaches can be successfully adopted for use in the context of higher education.

How successful these techniques are in measuring or managing the quality criteria identified in phase one of the project will be the focus of the evaluation.


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