

The Sixth *QHE* Seminar

The End of Quality?

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Anything goes? The concept of quality revisited.

Introduction

Quality is a slippery and multi-dimensional concept. It is a well-known fact that there are many different ways to perceive quality. It has been suggested that it is a waste of time to try to define quality (Green 1994, Bowden & Marton 1998). That is probably true if the aim is to find an all-comprehensive definition of what quality really is. However, it has also been pointed out that it is surprising that so much quality work has started without asking what, fundamentally, it is that is to be developed or assessed (Callert 1992, Barnett 1992, Frazer 1994, Harvey 1995, Brennan 1997). Today, when asking if we have come to the end of quality, this vagueness still remains – *what precisely* is it that might be coming to an end? To be able to answer that question we must know what the important aspects of quality are and what they stand for.

Current conceptions of quality

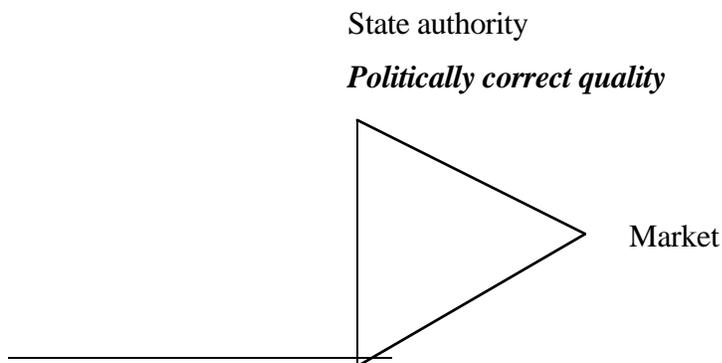
There are a great number of more or less differing perceptions of what is meant by quality in higher education (Giertz 2000a). Varying definitions have been suggested, but it has not been possible to reach consensus. The most widely accepted criterion of quality in higher education is probably “fitness for purpose” (Ball 1985). Consensus about this does not solve the problem of what is meant by quality in higher education: it just carries the discussion one step further to the question “what is the purpose of higher education?”. However, this is helpful, since to a large extent it is different opinions of what higher education is really for that lie behind the varying conceptions of what should be meant by quality in higher education. The different approaches to quality reflect different conceptions of higher education itself (Barnett 1992).

Several overviews of current conceptions of quality have been presented (Garvin 1988¹, Barnett 1992, Elliot 1993, Ellis 1993, Harvey & Green 1993, Freed & Klugman 1997, van Vught 1997, Giertz 2000a, Scheele 2000). Conceptions of quality have been categorised in different ways, showing different perspectives and illuminating various aspects.

A model for analysing quality in higher education

What is regarded as quality in higher education is fundamentally a political question and a question of power (cf. Ball 1985, Brennan 1997, Barnett 1992, Lindgren 1998). To validate different conceptions of quality in education one has to understand in what ideological connection the concept was formulated (Elliot 1993). To be able to understand discussions on quality in higher education we need *a structure* that highlights the important ideological differences between conceptions of quality and ties them to important stakeholder groups. We also need *a language* to talk about quality that will reveal what the controversy about quality in higher education is really about.

Clark (1983) used a triangle to illustrate the main social forces influencing higher education. Three key stakeholder groups – *the academic community, the market and the state* – were identified. Together with the distinction between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* aspects of quality and the addition of a third category, *politically correct quality*, Clark's triangle can be used as a model for analysing the current debate on quality in higher education (figure 1). The suggested quality aspects focus three different functions of higher education – to create knowledge and develop the minds of students, to serve the economy and to further the political agenda.



¹ Garvin's classification is based on perceptions of quality in industry, but have since been widely used also in relation to higher education.

Extrinsic quality

Academic community

Intrinsic quality

Figure 1: Three important stakeholder groups combined with three different approaches to quality in higher education.

Intrinsic, extrinsic and politically correct quality

Using varying terminology, a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of quality in higher education has frequently been made (e.g. Ball 1985, Barnett 1992, van Vught 1997). Van Vught gives the following description:

The extrinsic qualities refer to the capacities of higher education institutions to respond to the changing needs of the societies of which they are a part. (p 80)

The intrinsic qualities of higher education refer to the basic values and ideals, which form the very heart of higher education: the unfettered search for truth and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. (p 81)

Ball's description of the difference between 'value' and 'excellence' illustrates the same point:

Value and excellence both lie in quality and they are both important, but they are two very different issues. In the climate in which we live we could say that the student who had been through an engineering course and achieved third class Honours was valuable to British industry, but that he had not achieved excellence on the course. Conversely, we might say that the student who followed a course in my own subject, English, and achieved first class Honours was excellent in his course, but that he was less valuable to the society in which we now live than the other student. (p 100)

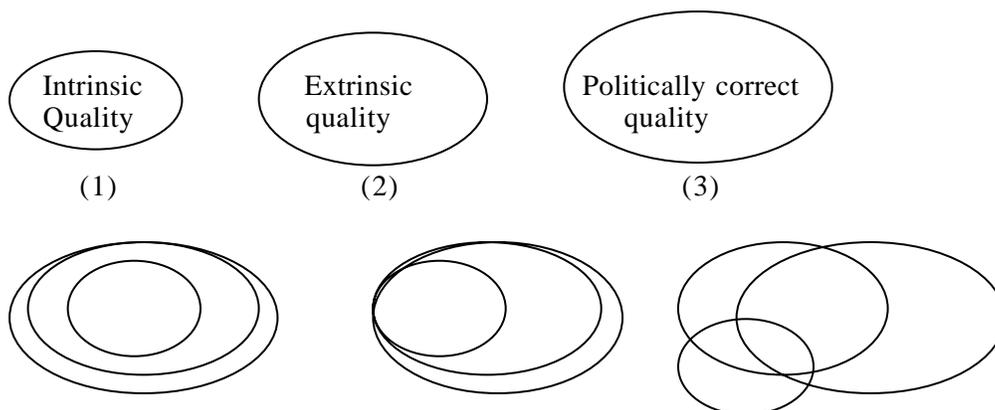
Intrinsic quality is traditional academic quality. It focuses the knowledge creating processes and student learning. Even though most academics today will agree that quality in higher education covers more than this, intrinsic quality represents the core of academic quality. The academic community can be seen as guardians of intrinsic quality.

Extrinsic quality concerns the demands that society directs towards higher education. These demands will change as society changes but as long as higher education is part of society they will always exist in some form. It could be argued whether extrinsic quality should be referred to the market or to the state – both could be seen as representing society. In the proposed model the

market is seen as representing extrinsic quality, both since qualified labour is an important part of what society wants from higher education and because, today, the state is using the quality movement to promote purely political purposes.

Politically correct quality is suggested as a new term to describe the role of the State authorities in relation to quality in higher education today. It refers both to the well-known fact that the state has the power to prescribe what kind of quality higher education should deliver (what kind of quality will be considered correct), and to the less recognised fact that many of the quality aspects proposed by the state are politically and ideologically motivated: quality is used to disguise other motives. Quality is a word with strong positive connotations; no one would say, “we do not care about quality”. Therefore, if something is presented as an important quality aspect, it is hard to argue against it. Calling something a quality factor is a smart way of introducing demands that it would otherwise be difficult to get acceptance for (cf. Laske & Meister Scheytt 2000).

Intrinsic, extrinsic and politically correct quality represents different approaches to what could be meant by quality in higher education. They differ in scope but are not mutually exclusive (figure 2). Intrinsic quality is a narrow concept that is *more or less* included in the other two (figure 2): both the market and the state will expect students to learn something through an education, but the kind of knowledge they expect does not necessarily coincide with the transformativ learning that is of central interest in academic quality. Extrinsic quality is largely – but not altogether – contained in what is regarded as politically correct quality. Politically correct quality contains aspects that are not included in any other perspective. Academics might agree that many such aspects are important *per se*, but they will not normally include them in what they regard as quality (Giertz 2000b).



(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 2: Examples of possible relations between intrinsic, extrinsic and politically correct quality.

Today there is a tendency to include more and more in the quality concept. Including everything that is regarded as important in what is called quality might make it seemingly easier to agree on a common definition, but it lessens the usefulness of the concept: a concept that covers too much ends up meaning nothing (Giertz 2000c).

A broad quality concept necessitates specifying priorities. An important difference between the three perspectives is what is regarded as most important – what is given priority when there are conflicting interests? For instance, even though intrinsic quality might be totally included in what government expects from higher education, other purposes might be regarded as more important – intrinsic quality is given a peripheral role (figure 2, alternative b) and has to stand back if a choice has to be made.

Most individuals include parts of more than one perspective in their personal conception of quality. Therefore, when looked at on an individual level, there might not seem to be any significant differences between the way different stakeholders perceive quality in higher education. Also, combining each perspective with a particular group of stakeholders should not be taken to mean that every individual in that group sees quality in exactly the same way; in every group there are pronounced individual differences. However, the suggested perspectives represent fundamentally different views of what higher education is for; it is important to describe each perspective separately in order to get a clear picture of what each stands for, what the ideological basis is, and what the implications of the proposed view of quality are. It will also make it possible to discover points of agreement and disagreement, thus providing a useful starting point for negotiations about a common platform for quality work in a given situation.

What should be regarded as quality in higher education would best be decided at the negotiating table rather than, as it has been described, in the battleground (Elliot 1993). If a point of view will be paid attention to in a negotiation it will have to be clearly formulated and convincingly presented. Discussions about quality in higher education often lack clear formulations of the

different alternatives. For instance, academics sometimes expect to have their view accepted (“we are the experts”) without having to formulate it (it cannot be put into words but “we know it when we see it”). In a situation where there are many stakeholders and several competing perspectives all claiming supremacy this is not an advisable strategy. A conception that cannot be convincingly explained is a sure loser.

A good start for understanding what the controversy about quality in higher education is about would be to produce *clear and detailed* formulations of what lies within each of the three different perspectives. What are the essential parts, what is indispensable and what can be changed or, if necessary, abandoned without impairing or risking to lose quality? What are the motives? Why is something important? What would happen if things were done differently? etc. The more clearly and convincingly a perspective is described and motivated, the better will be the possibility to influence what will be regarded as quality in higher education (this is of course true only if there is no hidden agenda. One result of detailed descriptions of each perspective would be to reveal concealed motives – a desirable result in its own right!)

What is accepted as evidence of quality in higher education at any given time will be a trade-off between the three described perspectives. To be sure, the state has the authority to enforce its view. But evidence shows that governments usually prefer to listen to the academic community and try to reach an agreement – at least this is true for most countries in the European Union (Scheele et al. 1998).

The end of quality?

What kind of quality in higher education might be coming to an end? Is it intrinsic, extrinsic or politically correct quality?

The state will continue to have an interest in using higher education to promote important political purposes. There is nothing wrong with that; the state pays for higher education and has a legitimate claim to influence what is done and to check that they get what they pay for. However, this does not necessarily have anything to do with quality in higher education. Academics would certainly argue that quality is something else. But quality is important, and it is to be expected that quality will continue to be used to further the political agenda. Therefore, there will still be a

demand for politically correct quality in higher education. If *the hope* is that this kind of quality will end it will not be fulfilled.

Higher education will continue to play an important role in modern society. If anything, the demand for qualified labour will increase. Extrinsic quality will always be important in higher education – as it has been since the Middle Ages (van Vught 1997). The nature of external demands will change over time, but they will always be there. There will be no end of extrinsic quality as such.

How about intrinsic quality? This is probably the kind of quality that is in mind when it is *feared* that quality in higher education is coming to an end. Will it be possible to uphold intrinsic quality under increased political and external pressure? That depends on how we handle the situation. I see two things as important:

- (1) To gain respect for the academic perspective we need to be able to explain clearly and convincingly to others what we mean by intrinsic quality, why this is important and how it should be achieved. The traditional tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966) of what quality means is no longer enough (Giertz 2000b).
- (2) We must also be prepared to make every possible change in organisation and methods in order to improve student learning (cf. Gibbs 1992), to handle an increased number of students (cf. Gibbs & Jenkins 1992) and to give adequate support to new categories of students. Quality does not require doing the same things that we have always done, but finding new ways to achieve the goals that have always been there. Higher education has to be transformed (Harvey 1997) for quality to be preserved.

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Birgitta Giertz
 Uppsala University
 Development and Evaluation Unit
 Box 256
 751 05 Uppsala
 Sweden

Tel +46-18-471 18 27
Fax +46-18-471 76 80
E-mail Birgitta.Giertz@uadm.uu.se