

## **THEME 3: Does the development of mass education necessarily mean the end of quality?**

It has been suggested that with the advent of mass higher education that:

- standards of achievement cannot be maintained especially where resources are cut and students have to do more paid work in order to pay for higher education;
- higher education is changing and student outcomes are different now than a decade ago;
- there are different demands from employers about the nature of graduates;
- nonetheless, there is grade inflation, which may not be affecting the top standards but is leading to more ‘passes’ at the bottom end;
- there are external pressures to increase pass rates, which will affect standards;
- external checks are concealing the drop in standards and the reduction in the unit of resource.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. Does mass higher education require a reassessment of the standards and purpose of higher education?
  2. Is quality being used as a mechanism to change higher education curricula and priorities?
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### **Mass higher education**

It was generally taken-for-granted that countries were moving towards ‘mass’ higher education, even if the participation rate was varied between countries. There was not much attempt to define what mass higher education is, but its implications were fairly clear. At root, mass higher education was seen as:

- an attempt to increase the level of education, skills and abilities of a country’s workforce;
- necessarily leading to the recruitment of students less well qualified at entry than is the case in an ‘élite’ system,
- necessitating greater value added from the system if there is to be no decline in ‘standards’;
- having resource implications as most governments are not prepared to fully fund expansion of higher education;
- resulting in access and equal opportunity issues.

All of this suggest that, in an era of mass higher education, value-added transformation ought to become the central element of any concept of quality rather than ‘excellence’, ‘fitness for purpose’ or ‘value for money’. It was considered unfortunate, by some delegates, that so little advance has been made on developing value-added approaches or measures. Although it might be difficult to measure student progress in any quantifiable way, some delegates suspected that there was no political will to develop value-added, not least because it might turn conventional league tables upside-down.

## **Student experience**

There was a general view that massification gives rise to concerns about the quality of the student experience.

Problems of student satisfaction/experience with large classes in a mass education situation were raised. On the assessment front, an important element of student learning, it was commented that marking 400 essays is a challenge, which takes a long time and limits feedback to students. Sometimes more useful, potentially formative assessments are replaced by simple summative assessments, such as multiple-choice assessments that are far less useful for students in developing their understanding. This is seen as a lowering of the standard of service to students, reflected in lower student satisfaction.

However, it was pointed out that it is necessary to distinguish between academic standards (of student achievement or ability), service standards provided by institutions, the quality of the higher education experience and student satisfaction.

It was acknowledged that mass higher education has led, *de facto*, to decreased funding, since more students rarely mean proportionate increase in funding. This has led to more pressure on resources — including staff time and increased class size (Netherlands). It has also meant that, in some situations, the demand and expansion in the system entirely outstrips the level of resourcing. In South Africa, for example, a class in information technology may have 900 people! But there will not be anything like that number of computers (if any!). In the US there is a move with large classes to have ‘professorial staff’ as ‘course designers’ — the actual teaching is done by postgraduate students and in some cases students rarely, if ever, meet full-time teaching staff. In the extreme situation, is external quality monitoring relevant in situations in which the system (or institution) must and will ‘soldier on’ no matter what the state of its resources or irrespective of the quality of its results?

The resource issue has also resulted in students undertaking more paid work working to support themselves at college or university, according to recent studies in Ireland and the Netherlands.

Nonetheless, there was a general agreement that mass education did not mean the end of quality, in the sense of the end of a quality student experience. Although, for example, mass education involves a different level of engagement with teaching staff, this is not

necessarily indicative of a worsening of the quality of the student experience. Mass higher education involves a different experience.

There is a need to constantly reassess what makes a high quality educational experience — the nature and purpose of higher education is changing. Modern ‘credit’ systems that are associated with mass education are very different from, but not necessarily worse than, traditional degree systems. It is not just mass higher education that has led to changes in the nature and purposes of higher education. Changes are taking place as a result of a variety of external influences, such as the need to teach transferable skills, lifelong learning, continuing professional development. Indeed, it could be argued that higher education is changing as a result of external requirements, which is leading to mass higher education.

The original university was to train priests, doctors and the ‘educated aristocracy’ — the élite. This is very definitely not the current need of society. Instead, what is required is ‘academic content’ and ‘key skills’ to equip graduates for social and work roles.

There were some delegates who thought the quality of outcomes is now more important than the quality of the processes. However, for others, the key issue is the range of learning (not just subject knowledge) but particularly how students are facilitated to become empowered learners. Learning how to learn was seen as most important and this involved a shift in focus from teaching to learning.

Taking into account increased flexibility and changing modes of access to higher education Finland has developed ways of measuring student achievement (and hence quality outcomes) which are adjusted for different kinds of learning schedules, so, for example, classroom delivery is only one of several possible ways of learning.

It was also argued that, with the growing focus on employability, work experience is an important part of the student experience of higher education. While sandwich courses may become more popular, there are potential problems of who will pay as students take longer to graduate. There are, of course, other forms of work experience than formal sandwich courses.

Throughout the discussion, there appears to be consensus that mass education does not necessarily lead to a drop in quality, but it certainly leads to necessary reconsideration of what quality means. The task for quality assurance becomes, then, to develop both theory and practical procedures that fit different notions of desirable quality in higher education. Discussion addressed the problem of defining quality education in ways that do not limit experimentation but remain functional as definitions which lead to measurements.

## **Standards**

There were concerns that massification leads to a decline in ‘standards’. Although rarely defined, the implication was that standards refers to the outcomes or the level of

intellectual ability of students. There seemed to be little discussion about massification impacting on standards of research.

There was little support for the notion that standards in higher education were declining. There was much more support for the idea that higher education has changed and that current and past standards cannot be compared. Things are different but standards are not worse.

Some delegates argued that evidence in their country suggested that standards are improving. To some extent, this view is predicated upon a value-added notion. At one level, the standard of education in a country has increased, irrespective of whether the standard of achievement of all graduates matches that of the élite graduates of the past. Second, the value-added by the system is greater as students are from a much wider variety of backgrounds. Third, the kinds of skills and abilities being developed within higher education are different from the past. Fourth, students have different cognitive processes and work differently, especially with interactive media, than did students in the past.

However, although it may not be sensible to talk of falling standards, they have changed, or in some circumstances, need to change. By retaining 'élite' standards, which focus almost exclusively on ability to engage with a subject, often assessed through traditional methods such as examinations, there is a risk of rising failure rates. Standards now involve skills and a wider set of abilities.

Similarly, mass education tends to lead to changed (lowered) entrance requirements for students. In Ireland and elsewhere, lowered entrance standards have often led to increased student attrition, whether that is because institutions are still judging students by elite standards or whether students decide that higher education is not for them. The problem, though, is that quality assurance bodies are now taking a keen interest in attrition rates.

This situation may be exacerbated by financial pressures on higher education institutions to maintain fee income by retaining its students. This retention pressure might result in leniency in assessment of students' academic achievement in the early years of a programme of study. However, this creates a serious issue in the final year. Are students failed, and the institution thus runs the risk of being seen as a failing institution, or are students passed and standards put at risk?

Standards need to be reassessed in the light of changing circumstances, such as shorter half-life of knowledge, impact of information technology, funding reductions, not just massification.

Thus, there is a new era in higher education, which needs new methods of evaluating standards that, for example, provide for continuous assessment and allow for assessment of skill development. Some ways of assessing individual added-value, it was argued, would be useful.

Having said that, there was a concern that, with massification, there will be ‘qualification drift’. Will ‘real’ higher education come to be the postgraduate qualifications, such as MA or MSc. The evidence in the UK to date is that this is not the case, unless a masters degree is linked to professional development or accreditation. This is different in other countries, where, for example, the standard outcome of an undergraduate education is a masters qualification or equivalent. The Bologna Declaration, in Europe, is addressing this issue.

Some delegates were not totally convinced that standards were not falling. In that light, it was also suggested that standards can not be allowed to fall in some areas (such as, medicine) but maintaining them may not be so important in other subject areas (such as, graphic design or women’s studies).

## **Quality as agent for change**

There was a distinction between quality monitoring (external and internal-external) as an agent of change within institutions and as a vehicle for government policy implementation.

Internally, quality processes have some impact (see Theme 1). One element of this, is the higher profile given to teaching ability. Teaching ability is now *expected* of academics and staff development, to enhance teaching ability, is more prevalent. ‘Academic freedom is not the freedom to teach badly’. At the same time, students must *expect* (and be able) to accept responsibility for their own learning, which is *not* a passive activity. Ironically, while teaching is gaining a higher profile, the teaching paradigm is being questioned.

Quality processes, it was argued, should and to some extent do, serve as a means to change curricula and priorities in response to changing (external) environment. The development of key skills and outcome-orientation are cases in point (see Theme 2).

Overall, there was some agreement that external quality monitoring has been used as a vehicle for the implementation of policy, although this has often been subverted. In many respects, delegates had no problem with many aspects of change linked to EQM, but the major disadvantage was the way it legitimated declining resources.

In an era of mass higher education, an approach to quality that grasped the transformative element and value added of the student experience was considered most important.

