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Quality and mass higher education in Australia: a matter of purpose, not standards

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Abstract

In Australia, the government has achieved its goal of mass education. The numbers prove it! Quality on the other hand is a more contentious concept and not so easily measured in quantitative terms. However, it seems that this has not deterred those 'directing the traffic' in higher education from using numbers as a measure of quality. Whether the current quality agenda in higher education is viewed as a political project or legitimate goal will ultimately be determined by stakeholder views of the purpose of higher education.

Introduction

Government policy introduced to increase access to higher education in Australia has been a resounding success. The number of enrolled students in higher education has grown from approximately 394,000 in 1987 to approximately 672,000 in 1998. This increase has been accompanied by a decrease in government funding of approximately 30% during the same period (Marginson & Considine 2000). In addition, as part of the global move to new forms of public sector management, governments have been focussed on the development of commercially minded, market-oriented management systems and structures for the higher education sector.

The Australian government is clear in its intention that universities are to develop their own individual goals, aims, strategies, indicators and outcomes, and that performance will be assessed against those criteria. A clear focus of the government is on ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality, however defined and measured, is delivered. The assumption implicit here is that if mechanisms exist, quality can be assured.

The manner in which these initiatives are viewed often reflects the views and perceptions of different stakeholder groups in higher education. For example, Erridge, Fee and McIlroy (1998) refer to quality initiatives as separate, yet potentially overlapping categories that may be defined as *political project* or *legitimate goal*. Identifying how stakeholders in the sector categorise quality initiatives as either a political project or legitimate goal assist in understanding whether there is a shared vision of the future and purpose of higher education in this country.

Universities are expected to educate more students with less direct government funding and report on the efficiency and effectiveness of their activities using measurement tools and techniques developed in and for the private sector. Underlying this agenda is the belief that quality initiatives in the public sector have resulted in improved efficiencies and effectiveness and that the tools and techniques adopted in the private sector are best served to ensure improved performance in the public sector. The result is a higher education sector servicing a growing number of students (clients/customers) with expectations of increasing levels of quality (continuous improvement) and reduced funding. Simply, there is a requirement to do more with less. Those who view the initiatives as a political project will question the rationale of this situation. However, others will view the process as leading to a more effective and efficient system of higher education — a legitimate goal.

So the question arises: does the requirement to do more with less, result in a lower quality product — a higher education system that operates with lower standards and reduced quality?

Defining quality in higher education

The term quality is an overused and undefined term in higher education. This is reflected in the literature where quality has been referred to in various ways as: a creature of political fashion (Becher 1999), a term notoriously elusive of prescription (Gibson 1985), a contentious concept (Taylor *et al*. (1998) and, a slippery concept (Harvey & Green 1993). More recently, a senior person in higher education policy in Australia is quoted as saying: 'If you want a definition of quality read "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance": there is no definition but you will know it when you find it!' (McConville, 2000).

Understanding the link between quality and standard is a circular form of understanding. High standards lead to high quality programmes which attract high quality students who demand high standards to ensure the level of programme quality (either actual or perceived) is maintained. Alternatively, reduced standards adversely impact the quality of a programme which then attracts students of a lesser standard which then further reduces standards and eventually the quality of the programme.

Are we clear on what is meant by standards and quality? There is uncertainty as to what is meant when we talk about standards and quality, let alone, 'high' standards or 'poor' quality. 'High' relative to what other standard? Which benchmark is used to determine 'poor' quality. The issue surrounding what is meant by these terms is exacerbated when efforts are made to measure quality, particularly in quantitative

terms. In the measurement of performance as it relates to the achievement of quality, there is an emphasis on numbers and that which can be calculated. Quantity, in fact becomes a surrogate for quality (Ritzer 1996, cited in Lapsley, 1999). Increasing student demand for a particular institution's programme enables a ranking of that programme. Where demand is high, the programme is viewed as being of a high quality. Where demand is low, the quality of the programme comes under question and may result in the programme being cancelled.

The purpose of higher education

Initially, identifying the purpose of higher education is necessary as this provides the benchmark so often absent from discussions of quality.

In 1939, the then Prime Minister of Australia, Robert Menzies identified seven traits of a true university. These traits referred to the university as; a home of pure culture and learning, a training school for the professions, a liaison between the academician and the 'good practical man', the home of research, a trainer of character, a training ground for leaders and a custodian of mental liberty and the unfettered search for truth (Pennington 1991).

More recently, university purpose is being defined by forms of strong executive control with 'definitions of quality and lines of accountability (are) drawn less from traditional public sector and political cultures, and more from the private sector and the culture of economic consumption, whether expressed through university-student relations, university-industry relations or university-government relations' (Marginson & Considine (2000).

Governments increasingly view higher education as an instrument for larger national goals including; international competitiveness, an ample and well trained labour force, a healthy balance of trade and as a mechanism to ensure more equitable economic opportunities (Ferris, 1992).

For example, employability of graduates is a key measure of university performance. It is easily quantified and clearly shows trends in performance. Not surprisingly, the result is a focus on vocational education by a number of institutions that are dealing with increasing numbers of students from different backgrounds and with different skills and attributes. Mass education it seems does not lend itself to many of the ideals espoused by Menzies. These ideals reflect a system of higher education reserved for those exhibiting the highest intellect (perhaps the privileged). This reflects an era of an élitist education system, vastly different from the mass system we now encounter.

As a result, standards which will reflect the context in which we operate, will inevitably change. However, whether we view this as a reduction in quality depends upon how we perceive the current agenda. That is, as a political project or one seeking legitimate goals in an environment vastly different from that of the past.

Observations of academics: some personal reflections

Whilst empirical studies of how academics view quality initiatives may be scant, it has been suggested that, in general terms, the goals and aims of university administrators are not in line with those of faculty staff members. For example, there is evidence of academic distrust of administration that is viewed as having a growing desire to conceive higher education as a corporate service industry acting as a government funded provider of services to students (Taylor *et al.* 1998). Research undertaken by Campbell *et al*. (1999) empirically tested the tension between administrators and academic faculty and confirmed their hypotheses that academics and administrators hold different views towards potential conflicts. Further evidence that there may be some disparity in the aspirations of administrators and academic staff particularly, is provided by research findings that indicate a steady increase in dissatisfaction and alienation among Australian academics (Everett *et al*. 1994; McInnes 2000).

The quality agenda and the link with mass education are so keenly debated because the positions stated and arguments presented represent value judgements. How strongly can we argue against the virtues of a utilitarian higher education system? How comfortable are we in recognising the potential impact on institutional standards as student numbers explode and the funding decreases? Who can argue against the importance of institutions providing an environment for intellectual challenge and growth? These questions evoke varying responses from stakeholder groups in the sector.

In my role as Teaching and Learning Coordinator in a School of Accounting and Law comprising 40 academic staff, I have been involved with many staff at various levels with respect to implementation of a T&L strategy at the school level. The strategy is viewed as one of the quality improvement initiatives in the university. The evidence presented below is purely anecdotal and is based my personal observations. An empirical study aimed a providing evidence of a more robust nature is the basis of my PhD research.

My observations are presented below in a manner that recognises the different perceptions and responses of staff to similar issues in the school. As a School of Accounting and Law, there are two disciplines represented.

- Senior staff are compliant (complicit?) with the new form public sector management cascading from the university centre (chancellery). That is how they have reached the top. We now have supervisors, strategies, performance indicators, targets and monthly reporting. We've lost the plot! Political.

- The change in management structure and style is more suited to the school operations and goals. In the past there has been too much slack in the system. In a School of Accounting and Law the accountants in particular recognise the value of strategies and performance measures for improved performance. Legitimate.

- Law academics (a clear majority, if not all) and a majority of accounting view the process as a political project, evidenced by little if any engagement in implementation of the strategy and their explicit negative comments in relation to

the quality agenda. Few would be aware of the contents of the T&L Strategy at the various levels in the university (centre, faculty and school). Political.

- Change takes time. We are heading in the right direction. There is an awareness of the existence of strategies, measures, and quality assurance mechanisms as part of the quality agenda in the school. Legitimate.

- The school continues to function in spite of the multitude of strategies, plans and intrusive quality assurance systems. "What are they going to do. Close us down!" Political.

- Engagement and implementation of the strategy is at a superficial level only. The level of quality behind the numbers is dubious. Political.

- The most recent academic appointments and those staff perceived as the 'up and comers' in the school are open to and optimistic about changes resulting from quality initiatives. Legitimate.

- Criticisms of the changing environment are not welcome and seen as destructive. The 'yes' people get promoted. Political.

- Staff at various levels in the school, who have engaged in the process are viewed as having 'caved in' to this new form of public sector management. Political.

- There is an awareness of the changing student cohorts they engage with and the changing purpose of higher education with a focus on developing a number of skills other than those of a purely technical nature. The approach to teaching and learning reflects this. Expectations and assessment have changed to reflect this. Academic staff is responsive to the changing environment. This result is consistency in final grades over the past 5 years. Legitimate.

- There are some suspicions about the standards in subjects that have maintained their pass rates over the past five years. Political.

Initially, I sought to categorise my own perceptions of these observations as 'political project' and/or 'legitimate goal'. Naturally, that process and categorisation reflected my own value judgements. My PhD research will investigate *how* accounting and law academics view quality in higher education, *why* they have these views and *what* effect these views have on their job performance.

Conclusions

Quality in higher education is not a passing phenomenon as some may have thought (or hoped). It is central to the government's position on new public sector management as the vehicle to drive improved efficiencies and effectiveness in the higher education sector. As a consequence, the quality agenda is dominated by quantitative measures of performance purported to measure efficiency and effectiveness. Whether the dominant stakeholders in the process view the quality agenda as a political project or legitimate goal is critical question that evokes a value judgment in determining a response. As a result, these value-laden judgments are

difficult to refute with any appeal to logic. Perhaps this is what ensures the discourse about quality in higher education is never dull.

Where there is a common stakeholder view on the quality agenda for higher education, there is the potential for discussion and debate on the purpose and role of universities in the new century. If there are disparate stakeholder views, there is an urgent need to identify, then acknowledge those differences and begin the process of informed discussion and debate so that a shared view may be developed.

This discussion will both confronting and challenging. Participation will serve to ensure that as stakeholders in the sector, our comments are informed and that our contributions are valuable and valued, by others at all levels within and outside the sector. The discussion will assist in unravelling the complex issues surrounding the nature of quality and, the question of standards in higher education.

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