University of Chester

What is quality?

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Overview

- Theme 1: Origins of the quality debate
- Theme 2: Conceptual and definitional issues
- Theme 3: External and internal quality purposes
- Theme 4: Quality systems: design and development
- Theme 5: Beyond systems and definitions – quality in use:
- a perspective on quality as 'practiced', 'used' and 'experienced'
- Theme 6: Lessons learned

Theme 1
Origins of the quality debate

'*The concept of quality is not new: it has always been part of the academic tradition. It is the outside world that now emphasises the need for attention to quality...It is the relationship between higher education and society which has changed*'.

(Vroeijenstijn 1995)

The quality revolution: the changing context of higher education

- Growth and diversity
- Larger class sizes; declining unit of resource
- 'Elite' to 'Mass' system
- Changes in funding; efficiency gains
- Changing student profile
- Growing state interest; demands for accountability
- Establishment of national quality agencies
- Global concern with quality and standards

Quality and 'the withdrawal of trust':
the UK example

- Kogan (1989): 'quality' and 'accountability' linked to 'drive towards managerialism'
- Signified 'withdrawal of trust' (Trow, 1994)
- …lack of trust in academia's capability to critically assess its activities
- …reshaping through funding and external accountability mechanisms
- …emergence of business models

Theme 2: conceptual and definitional issues

Defining quality…illustrating the confusion

Quality is…'a creature of political fashion' (Becher, 1999); 'multi-faceted' (Frazer, 1992); 'elusive' (Neave, 1994); 'slippery and value-laden' (Harvey and Green, 1993)

- 'No authoritative definition of quality in higher education is possible' (Scott, 1994)
- 'Lack of theory of quality' (Westerheijden, 1999)
- '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)
- 'In the last resort, quality is a philosophical concept' (Green, 1994)

Difference between quality and standards

'quality'

- relates to <u>process</u> (e.g., the quality of the educational process experienced by students)

'standards'

- intended or actual <u>achievement</u> or <u>outcome</u>

'linking quality and standards'

- contribution of educational process (<u>quality</u>) to attainment of a defined <u>standard</u>

The notions of academic standards, service standards, and quality standards

Standards: three areas of activity:

academic standards
- measure ability to meet specified level of academic attainment

service standards
- measures devised to assess service provided

quality standards
- norms expressed in formal statements about expected practice (e.g. ENQA 'standards and guidelines')

Applying quality concepts

a) Quality as a 'stakeholder-relative' concept

b) Quality as a mechanism (processes of quality assurance)

c) Quality as a concept: Harvey and Green's (1993) five categorisations

a) A pragmatic approach: quality as 'stakeholder-relative'

- Quality not a unitary concept: it's stakeholder-relative
- Multiple perspectives: different interest groups ('stakeholders'), different priorities
- …for students and teachers, the process of education;
- …for employers, the outputs of higher education

'The best that can be achieved is to define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality, and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken'

(Green, 1994)

b) Quality as a mechanism

- 'Quality' as a <u>mechanism</u> refers to processes of assessment, accreditation, audit, and external examination (Harvey and Newton 2005)
- <u>Quality assurance</u>…checking quality of a process or outcomes
- <u>Audit</u>…external or internal check on internal quality management system or processes
- <u>Assessment</u>…external or internal judgement of performance against criteria (e.g. 'quality' of teaching or research)
- <u>Accreditation</u>…process resulting in decision to 'warrant' an institution or a programme
- <u>External examination</u>…checks standards

c) Categorising quality: relationship to assurance processes
(Harvey and Green, 1993; Harvey, 2006)

Quality as exceptional or as excellence
- associated with distinctiveness or standards
- various connotations: league tables; benchmarks; standards checking; 'gold standard'
- assurance through external examiners, accreditation, or audit

Quality as perfection or consistency
- shift to measurement of <u>process</u> standards not <u>outcome</u> standards
- relative concept of quality
- more applicable to organisational and service standards
- academic audit may focus on administrative processes

c) Categorising quality [cont'd]

Quality as fitness for purpose
- contrast with elitist notions
- does product or service fit the stated purpose?
- is institution fulfilling its mission?
- Accrediting or assurance body requirement for conformance to defined standards, or 'subject benchmarks' (UK QAA)
- Quality assessment/accreditation focus on 'fitness for purpose' of academic standards
- ENQA standards permit generic judgements of organisational standards

c) Categorising quality [cont'd]

Quality as value for money

- quality of provision, processes, or outcomes, judged against monetary cost

- quality as return on investment by stakeholders

- assurance mechanisms include performance data (student retention/completion/employment)

c) Categorising quality [cont'd]

Quality as transformation (Harvey and Knight, 1995)

- Development or empowerment of student through learning process
- also institutional changes enabling better learning or research
- accreditation may explore value added element of 'widening access'
- external examination of research degrees evaluates transformation
- principal evaluation mechanism is improvement audit…
- …forward-looking and agenda-setting

Theme 3: External and internal quality purposes

Accountability and improvement requirements

'Quality assurance is not just the latest fashion, but is a remarkably successful management fad…' (Stensaker 2005)
'This is a success that is sustained by government endorsement, because it provides a means of securing accountability' (Harvey, 2005)

- Accountability requires external scrutiny and publishable outcomes
- QE requires that external scrutiny is linked into a process of continuous quality improvement (institutional and academic discipline levels)

Implications for institutions and agencies: some 'rules of engagement'?

- Universities responsible for quality and standards
- HEIs require systems for managing and improving quality and meeting accountability requirements
- QA systems should be robust, transparent, premised on self-evaluation
- Stakeholders require accessible information on quality of higher education
- National agencies accredit or conduct quality reviews to secure value for public investment
- National agencies' QA and QE activities should assist institutions' discharge of responsibilities

The deal?

The greater the transparency in how institutions maintain quality of provision and set and review standards of awards, the more the need for intense external scrutiny will diminish.

Theme 4:
Quality systems: design and development requirements

An effective quality assurance system…

- Clear specification of roles, responsibilities, procedures
- Enables institutional aims and objectives to be achieved
- Informs decision making
- Free from individual bias
- Repeatable over time
- Involves all staff
- Includes the specification of standards and acceptable evidence
- Prompts continuous improvement

(Learning from Audit, HEQC, 1994)

Quality systems: design and development requirements [cont'd)

Development of a quality culture…

- Open, active commitment to quality at all levels
- Willingness to engage in self-evaluation
- A firm regulatory framework; clarity and consistency of procedures
- Responsibilities for quality control and quality assurance
- Emphasis on obtaining feedback
- Commitment to identifying and disseminating good practice
- Prompt managerial action to redress problems

(Learning from Audit, HEQC, 1994)

Meeting the challenges of enhancement and regulation: the notion of alignment

'The purposes of quality enhancement and institutional development…are considered achievable if an appropriate *alignment* can be found between *philosophy*, *technology*, and *context*' (Williams, G., 1996; emphasis added)

- philosophy: 'the shared values and ideals which inform the approach to quality' (…quality culture)
- technology: 'the range of instruments, techniques, and operating procedures which promote and support quality assurance and enhancement' (…quality system)
- context: 'distinctiveness of mission' and circumstances of an institution ('the realities of context')
- alignment : between quality culture, quality system, regulatory context and climate of operation

Linking quality culture, quality systems and regulatory requirements

- EQM judges whether internal self-assessments are accurate and informed
- is EQM viewed as a threat to be endured…?
- …or as an opportunity and challenge?

Matching EQM requirements

Institutional quality approach	External expectations (subject level)	External expectations at institutional level
Ownership; acceptance of responsibility	Self-evaluation: subject	Self-evaluation: institution
Setting and reviewing aims and processes of teaching and learning	Fitness for stated purpose	Robust quality systems and fitness for/of purpose test
Emphasis on continuous quality improvement	Quality enhancement	Quality enhancement and high level of critical awareness
Setting and meeting targets and priorities	Influencing shape of 'quality profile'	Influencing 'index of surprise'

(Newton, 1997)

Theme 5 :
Beyond systems and definitions
quality in use

a)   questions emerging during the 'quality revolution'

b)   barriers to quality

c) a perspective on quality as 'practiced', 'used' and 'experienced'

Practical questions inherited from the 1990s quality debate…

- Can quality be maintained and managed effectively?
- Does accountability provide sufficient basis to deliver quality improvement? (Harvey, 1994; 1995)
- Can accountability and enhancement be reconciled?
- Can external and internal requirements be balanced?
- How were academics receiving, responding to, and coping with 'quality' and 'quality policy'?

Barriers to quality

Principal challenges

- Higher education as 'grotesque turbulence' (Webb, 1994)
- Managing fundamental changes in context of academic work
- Reconciling accountability and improvement
- Achieving alignment
- Sustaining integrity of quality systems:
- how is institutional system and EQM viewed by staff?
- divergence between EQM bodies and university staff?
- divergence between 'managers' and 'managed'?
- perceptions of quality as a 'burden'?
- delivering tangible improvements?
- improved quality…or improved systems?

Studying the impact of quality on the academic community

That we [academics] devote so little time to analysing what it is we do, and how others are increasingly coming to shape that work, must be one of the great unexplained educational issues of our time.

(Smyth, Academic Work, 1995)

The meaning of teaching quality has been transformed by the audit process…This major transformation remains curiously under-researched and under-theorised.

(Shore and Wright, Coercive Accountability, 2000)

Deconstructing quality: the 'career' of a concept – 'formal meanings'

- Early 1990s: HEIs defined, categorised, operationalised most suitable notion of 'quality'
- EQM growth ...and associated 'quality' terminology and vocabulary
- Some experimented with 'industrial models'

- Typical <u>formal meanings</u> of 'quality'
- …excellence…value for money…perfection…fitness for purpose…transformation of the learner (Harvey and Green)

Deconstructing quality: the 'career' of a concept – emergence of 'situated meanings'

Impact studies: quality in context, quality as practice

- Mid/late 1990s: 'impact studies' and 'close up' studies
  (Newton, 1999a; 2000; Henkel 2000; Horsburgh, 1999; Trowler, 1998; Shore and Roberts, 1995; Shore and Wright, 2000)
- Quality systems meet accountability requirements
- Quality associated with 'burden' and 'bureaucracy'…rather than improvement
- Factors other than EQM impact on improvement of teaching and learning
- Gap between views of 'managers' and 'managed', and with EQM bodies

Academics coping with quality: emergent questions

- how do academics respond to quality assurance and monitoring regimes?

- how do staff engage with quality frameworks and policy?

- what meanings do front-line staff attach to different facets of quality?

- are they adopters of policy…? or resisters?

- …or makers and shapers of quality policy and quality initiatives?

Deconstructing quality:
the 'career' of a concept

*from 'formal meanings' to 'situated meanings': unravelling
the politics of quality*

'Front-line' academics' <u>situated perceptions</u> of quality…
(Newton, 1999b; 2002a)

'Ritualism' and 'tokenism'	'discipline' and 'technology'
'impression management'	'front-line staff resistance'
'burden'	'lack of mutual trust'
'culture of 'getting by'	'suspicion of management motives'

Illustrating contrasting meanings of quality

Dominant <u>formal meanings</u> of 'quality' in the early 1990s	<u>Situated perceptions</u> of 'quality' of front-line academics: from mid-1990s
Quality as… 'perfection' or 'consistency' 'value for money' 'total quality' 'culture change' 'peer review' 'transforming the learner' 'fitness for purpose' 'excellence' 'customer satisfaction'	Quality as… 'failure to close the loop' 'burden' 'lack of mutual trust' 'culture of getting by' 'impression management' 'constraints on teamwork' 'discipline and technology' 'ritualism and tokenism' 'front-line resistance'

(Newton, 2002a)

Academics coping with quality: messages and common themes

- Importance of 'users' views of quality policy
- Staff develop 'coping mechanisms' and 'strategies
- Front-line academics are the real makers and shapers of quality policy
- Importance of emergent properties of quality system
- Transformative concepts of quality may be undermined by situational constraints and contextual factors

Academics coping with quality: messages and common themes

- *'Any quality assurance model, method or system, will <u>always</u> be affected by situational factors and context. This leads to the view that the success of a system may be less dependent on the rigour of application, and more on its contingent use by actors and protagonists, and on how the system is viewed and interpreted by them'*.

(Newton, 1999b)

Theme 6: Lessons learned

Demystifying quality: lessons learned since the 1990s

Lessons learned…from 'close up' study and 'impact studies'

- Valuable insights into academics' responses to 'quality', and changing work context
- Emerging picture of impact on academic identities
- Alternative perspectives and meanings to 'formal' definitions and meanings of early 1990s

Demystifying quality (cont'd)

Lessons learned… about quality policy

- Lesson one: quality 'essentially contested' – competing voices and discourses
- Lesson two: no 'blueprint': 'close up study' reveals constraints of context
- Lesson three: quality is not a 'blank sheet'
- Lesson four: there is a difference between planned outcomes of policy and those which emerge through implementation
- Lesson five: there is an implementation gap – academics are 'makers' and 'shapers' of quality policy
- Lesson six: 'situatedness' – quality is relative to how front-line actors construe and construct 'quality'

Demystifying quality (cont'd)

Lessons learned… about quality management and the management of change

- Lesson seven: learn to deal with ambiguity – 'quality enhancement is a messy business' (Newton, 2002b)
- Lesson eight: are accountability and improvement reconcilable?
- Lesson nine: are higher education organisations rational, manageable entities? are quality managers 'change heroes' or 'passive victims'?
- Lesson ten: to manage change effectively institutional managers must assess climate of operation, and respond purposefully on the basis of such an assessment.