**Quality Assessments and Excellence**

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**Introduction**

The core elements in modern quality assurance processes in higher education are quality assessment and excellence. Both must be viewed within the context of the broader debate about the meaning of quality in higher education. Quality has only relatively recently been defined in the context of higher education and it remains a controversial issue. Indeed, some commentators went so far in the early 1990s as to argue that definition was impossible. Vroeijenstijn (1991) said that ‘it is so hard to define quality in HE that we should give up bothering’, whilst Scott (1994) concluded that ‘no authoritative definition of quality in higher education is possible.’ The few commentators who addressed this issue were willing, at best, to agree, following Pirsig’s (1974) view that ‘even though Quality cannot be defined, you know what it is.’ Harvey and Green (1993) were bolder and identified a series of dimensions of quality in higher education (quality as: exceptionality, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation) that have remained influential. Scholars have continued to explore definitions of quality, both within this schema and without, but it is clear that whatever is understood by quality metamorphoses over time according to contemporary socio-political and philosophical biases. Barnett felt (1992) that quality cannot be assured but that the academic community had a responsibility to be more explicit and transparent about many of their practices. Implicit notions of quality have, arguably, given way to explicit.

The flourish of discussion about quality in the early 1990s can be traced to the political context of the 1980s. Arguably, modern quality assurance practices were introduced as part of a wider development of neo-liberal economic and social ideology that is now associated with New Public Management. This was the core of the development of Neave’s notion of the ‘evaluative state’, in which the state combines ‘verification, assessment of performance and control over costs and output’, a notion that has both developed and remained relevant since the late 1980s (Neave, 2012; 1988). Massification and globalisation of higher education have also had an impact on the debate about how quality is maintained and deeply influenced the development of quality assurance. The core concerns of how to maintain standards and provide education that is fit for purpose in a context of growing numbers of students and growing numbers of cross-border arrangements is a key imperative for modern higher education.

**Quality assessment**

Quality assessment in higher education is best understood as a process of measuring the quality of an institution, programme or specific components (Harvey, 2004–2017). The subject of assessment is, broadly, the core functions of higher education: teaching and research. However, the focus of assessment of these areas is continually developing. In the assessment of teaching, there has been a shift in emphasis from measuring teaching to measuring the learning of students. The collection and analysis of evidence such as student feedback focused on student satisfaction with teaching and services that they received. The emphasis is increasingly on how much and how effectively the students have learnt from the teaching. In research assessment, the emphasis has changed from quantity to impact. The main focus of research assessment exercises was, until recently, upon the individual performance and based mainly on such measurements as citation indices. More recently, the focus has been on groups of scholars and the impact of their work. In both cases, there has been a change in emphasis from measuring tangible outputs to less tangible outcomes.

This implies a set of metrics and these vary according to what is being measured. Measurement is against external criteria such as fitness-for-purpose standards or internal criteria such as institutional missions or objectives. Measurement focuses on inputs (including teachers and learning resources), processes (including teaching and learning support) and outcomes (including students’ academic performance and professional competence, employment rates and self-reflection on learning) (Harvey, 2002). Assessment takes account of a range of evidence, including statistical data, student performance data, observation, stakeholder feedback surveys and interviews with stakeholders and professional bodies (Harvey, 2004-2017). Quality assessment hence implies a need for a systematic process of collecting and analysing data. However, because individual sources of evidence, such as student satisfaction surveys for teaching or citation indexes for research, can be highly controversial as indicators there is a need for triangulation of such data. The fear, especially amongst academics, often given voice in media and social media, is that a growing emphasis on measurement is, in fact, a threat to the autonomy of the academy. Indeed, something of Foucault’s discussion in *Discipline and Punish* can be seen in the ‘meticulousness of the regulations, the fussiness of the inspections, the supervision of the smallest fragment of life and the body…’ The data collected on staff and students, may well be seen as creating power over these stakeholders as much as offering them a ‘voice’ in the development and management of the institution.

Measurement is associated with an essential judgement on the aspect of the institution under review. Quality assurance agencies provide information about specific judgements that they make at the close of a quality assessment and it is usually a grade from one or more of a range of grading systems. Woodhouse (1999) observed that the grade might be numeric, using a percentage or a likert-type scale; it might be an alphabetic scale from A to F; or it might be descriptive, usually ‘excellent’, ‘good’, ‘satisfactory’ or ‘unsatisfactory’. However, this did not take account of the other possible outcome of quality assessment, which is accreditation (Wächter et al., 2015). Whilst accreditation must be based on assessment, accreditation decisions are not always based on an assessment of the level of quality: rather, they are often based on threshold requirements having been met or even that requirements have been complied with (Harvey, 2004—2017). Accreditation may, therefore, be more often a proxy for quality in higher education rather than an actual indicator of quality.

Through the collection and analysis of data, quality assessment enables institutions to be ‘benchmarked’ against others, national norms or against themselves over time (Harvey, 2004–2017). The key phrase here is ‘over time’. Quality assessment usually provides a snap shot of current performance and will be ‘benchmarked’ against current measurements. However, over time, it is possible to see how an institution’s performance changes and whether there are any clear trends in particular areas. Monitoring how things have changed over time is an important aspect of collecting institutional data. Not only can it indicate patterns of improvement or decline, it can also indicate which areas are particularly difficult to improve. For example, student surveys have long shown how difficult it is to provide effective solutions to the problem of assessment and feedback on students’ work, demonstrating that there are no easy, quick solutions to some specific issues (Williams and Kane, 2009).

All this highlights that quality assessment can be viewed as synonymous with ‘evaluation’ (Harvey, 2004–2017). However, there are a range of differing perspectives on evaluation and its purpose and it is likely that these will affect views of assessment in the context of higher education. Care must be taken when assuming that quality assessments are evaluations as this implies a range of characteristics that are not necessarily present in quality assessments. The key issue here is whether assessment or evaluation is seen as formative or summative. If the first view is taken, then quality assessment is seen as part of an ongoing improvement process. If the second, then the result is simply a final judgement on the quality of an institution. Both can be part of the same process of continual quality improvement but often, the summative evaluation takes precedence for the purposes of public information and it is not always clear how information from the summative evaluation can feed into an improvement process.

Discussion of quality assessment often assumes a link with quality improvement. This debate is part of the wider discussion of the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement in which there is a tension between the monitoring and accountability functions of quality management and the function of improvement. Arguably, there is a spectrum of relationships between quality assessment and quality improvement which ranges from little or no relationship through to an integrated quality assessment and improvement process or cycle. The goal of quality assessment, according to some commentators, including quality assurance agencies, is improvement. In some countries, part of the role of quality assurance agencies is to provide advice on how to improve aspects of an institution’s provision (Wächter et al., 2015).

Much more emphasis is placed in discussion on the role of external quality assessment rather than self- or internal assessment by institutions (Harvey, 2004–2017). In some descriptions, self-assessment is not mentioned. In others, self-assessment plays a varying role: in some cases it is viewed as a core part of the process of assessment whilst in others it is given a less central role. In part, the emphasis on external assessment is due to the potential for bias and self-interest on the part of the institution and its staff. However, for genuine improvement to occur, there needs to be self-reflection amongst staff.

For academic staff, the development of quality assessment is viewed in various ways. Much of the research on quality assurance since the 1990s has highlighted a shift from trust-based to regulatory approaches to quality and this has resulted in a growing tension between academics and quality assurance processes (Harvey and Williams, 2010). Research on academic perceptions of quality assurance highlights staff dissatisfaction with what they perceive as top-down approaches to quality assessment that ignore their needs and contexts. This is reflected in the debate about the need for a fuller engagement with quality assurance processes amongst academic staff. This implies a need for a system in which academics are fully engaged stakeholders in the quality improvement process and that it is part of a developmental system that is based on mutual trust. However, the development of formalised quality assurance processes has led to a perceived erosion of trust in the professionalism of academics and a decline in trust in the institutions themselves (Gibbs, 2007).

Quality assessment systems are frequently adopted from one country to another but this raises the problematic issue of cultural transferability (Harvey and Williams, 2010). Systems are frequently transferred from countries such as the US and the United Kingdom to developing countries but little thought is given to the very different contexts and traditions of higher education that exist in those countries. It is not always clear that systems that have developed in one context can be so easily transferred to another. Increasingly, there is interest in quality processes developed in the European Union as part of the Bologna Process in other parts of the world. The Bologna Process has gone some way to alleviate the problems of transferring systems as its focus is on harmonisation of the many different higher education systems across Europe (Wächter et al., 2015). Perhaps this is a more applicable model of quality management in regions outside the European Union.

**Excellence**

The highest possible judgement that can be received after a quality assessment, indeed, the goal itself, is that of excellence. The term ‘excellence’ has become increasingly prominent in debate on higher education to such an extent that it has become a notable part of the nomenclature of the sector, a trend foreseen by Readings’ in the 1990s (1996). Whilst quality itself and excellence are often used interchangeably (Harvey and Green, 1993), assessment and ‘excellence’, too, have almost become synonyms in the common discourse of higher education. In countries such as the United Kingdom, the term has become an integral part of the current quality assessment frameworks in the United Kingdom. The Research Assessment Exercise has been replaced with the ‘Research Excellence Framework’ and this has been followed by the ‘Teaching Excellence Framework’.

Excellence is usually understood as the characteristic of being unusually good and unsurpassable (Harvey, 2004–2017). However, it is generally accepted that excellence is a difficult phrase to define satisfactorily (Brusoni et al., 2014). Indeed, excellence is often defined using phrases that are vague and ill-defined themselves. Excellence is frequently defined as ‘very good’, ‘outstanding’, or ‘surpassing standard thresholds of quality’, or in the case of research, where, intellectually, a ‘substantial contribution’ is made. This highlights the difficulty of identifying the essence of excellence in any given area. Excellence, as Readings, highlighted (1996), has an emptiness to it: indeed, it may be seen as an empty signifier in the context of higher education. One issue that Readings highlighted as part of the tools for assessing excellence and has continued to stimulate much debate is the development and use of ‘rankings’. Rankings are a proxy for quality and commentators have highlighted the dubious criteria on which many league tables are based (Harvey, 2004-2017).

Perhaps as a concerned response to developments such as this, the notion of excellence as a ‘concept’ in higher education has also begun to emerge. The European association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) Excellence Working Group has been developing the concept to underpin European quality assurance (Brusoni et al., 2014). Frameworks such as Baldridge in the United States and the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) have become popular points of reference for quality management teams in higher education institutions. However, as the ENQA working group highlights, there is a tendency in higher education to identify examples of ‘good practice’ with little critique. There is, perhaps a dichotomy between recognising theoretical and philosophical challenges in applying notions of quality and practice.

In the traditional notion of quality, exceptionality or excellence is implicitly exclusive (Harvey and Green, 1993). This is currently tension in the understanding of excellence in higher education. Some scholars have encouraged approaches to develop excellence for all, especially in teaching (Gibbs, 2010; Elton, 1998). This appears to be an inclusivist approach that allows all lecturers to achieve excellence. However, concurrently, there are trends towards a focusing of excellence on individual centres. This is a strategy to focus limited resources on existing and developing expertise.

This approach is problematic because it limits resources to an exclusive group: the stronger institutions with longer standing reputations are advantaged over weaker ones (Brusoni et al., 2013). If ‘excellence’ is an aim for all universities, it has implications for institutions and systems that aim to open higher education to a wider population. Notions of excellence in teaching and research in higher education are, using Bourdieu’s lens, entwined with traditional concepts of academic knowledge and writing which are, in turn, entwined with the socio-economic background of staff and students. At the same time, if institutions become known as excellent in their particular fields, they then begin to attract applicants with the most appropriate academic qualifications – the right social capital - from further afield. It then becomes more competitive for students who may have been recruited from a more localised hinterland. This is a major dilemma for institutions.

Notions of excellence, like that of quality itself, depend on individual and group perspectives. As Readings has asserted (1996: 33), ‘Everyone has his or her own idea of what [excellence] is.’ Academics may have different views of the nature of excellence than students. The notion of excellence provided by government or employers may be different again. There is some evidence that academic staff are more likely to focus on external markers of excellence whereas students are more likely to focus on personal attributes. For staff, markers of excellence might include publications and other dissemination in prestigious fora, research funding and prizes. For students, markers of excellence include their own action and attributes, self-motivation and passion (Berg and Sabatini, 2004).

Other ‘markers’ of excellence are external and tend to relate to specific political and social concerns. Excellence in research is increasingly entwined with the notion of ‘impact’. Impact has been, since the late 2000s, a proxy for excellence. Although impact has been clearly defined by such organisations as the Economic and Social Research Council, the issue of impact remains intensely controversial subject for academics. For the Higher Education Council of England, impact is understood as being external to the academy, which causes particular concern for scholars in the humanities and pure sciences. This is perhaps related to a second marker of excellence, which is the need for effective communication of research to the ‘public’. The public role of research has become an important concern of all researchers because research that is funded by public money is increasingly required to be presented and communicated to a wider audience than the community of academics. A third ‘marker’ that frequently appears but is seldom defined is ‘innovation’, again, one that seems to be a proxy for excellence, but one that is often only a rhetorical device that has little real meaning.

Excellence can also be a marker for cultural identity. Two examples stand out. First, European Union research funding is awarded partly on the basis that successful proposals affirm and strengthen European integration and harmonisation. Excellence here is related to the wider goals of the European Union. Second, in South Africa, an essential element of excellence of a higher education institution is that it ‘affirm[s] its African identity’ (Harvey, 2004-2017). This introduces a further notion of excellence: that it should be a part of an attempt to promote a sense of cultural identity in higher education sectors which have been modelled firmly on external systems, addressing the challenge.

**Conclusion**

This reminds us of Singh’s (2010) reflections on the future of quality assurance, in which she highlights other, more ‘outlying’ criteria of quality in countries such as South Africa, which include concern for social justice and social transformation. Indeed, Harvey (2009), building on Adorno’s notion of education as a moral and democratising force, argues that quality assurance should be a democratising influence, and one that enhances and transforms higher education. For Harvey, the challenge is that quality assessment appears autocratic and the peer review is often not the soft supportive experience it ought to be. Quality assessment appears to be more about, in a Foucauldian sense of power relationships, not only the state, but academics themselves exercising power over others Foucault, 1982). At the same time, the focus on excellence as reflected in the growing number of rankings, as Harvey argues (2009), is fundamentally undemocratic: it is ‘the monster lurking in the wings that has populist appeal’ and threatens the ‘critical core of higher education’.

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