

Quality in Higher Education: The Missing Academic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

"Although quality has become the focus of attention, its meaning is not always clear nor its usage consistent. Indeed, the notion of quality in higher education has no agreed technical meaning and its use usually involves a heavy contextual overlay of some political or educational position".

A decade later this statement still rings true. It will be argued in this paper, that the use of quality as part of a political project focussed on increasing layers of accountability in the Australian Higher Education outweighs the contextual education overlay suggested by Lindsay, where quality may be perceived as a legitimate goal for continuous improvement in the sector.

INTRODUCTION

“Although quality has become the focus of attention, it’s meaning is not always clear nor its usage consistent. Indeed, the notion of quality in higher education has no agreed technical meaning and its use usually involves a heavy contextual overlay of some political or educational position” (Lindsay, 1992). A decade later this statement still rings true. One potential reason for this may be that academics in higher education conceptualise quality differently from other stakeholders in the system. This raises the question of where legitimacy for defining, assessing and measuring quality rests and the extent of political and/or education overlay that influences the perceptions of various stakeholders in higher education.

In this paper a general discussion of the importance of recognising how different stakeholders think about quality in higher education will be discussed. Four stakeholders in HE; government, the AUQA, Universities and Academics will be considered in the discussion. Role conflict theory will be discussed as a potential explanation for the lack of engagement by academics at the local level with the quality agenda as it is currently portrayed.

CONCEPTUALISING QUALITY

Discussion around what constitutes quality in higher education continues to be the focus of introductory comments in the literature and with good reason. Academics are concerned to be able to identify and understand concepts that form the basis of contemporary discourse in the sector and quality is just that: a concept that since the mid-80’s has increasingly dominated discussions about the role and future of higher education institutions and the academics that constitute those institutions around the globe.

A review of the literature around change in higher education, particularly in relation to change as a result of quality initiatives reveals two broad ways of thinking about quality; one relating to context and the other relating to stakeholders.

The first gives quality a context-specific meaning where quality is attached to a context and as a consequence quality becomes meaningful (Trow, 1991; Baird, 1988; Fry 95, Nordvall and Braxton, 1996). For example, references to the quality of assessment, student intake, academic programs, teaching and learning, the student experience and program designs are not uncommon. Any attempt to define or attach meaning to the term is largely ignored and one is left to assume that it is ‘high’ quality that is being referred to as opposed to ‘good’ or ‘poor’ quality.

A second way of thinking about quality relates to a stakeholder-specific meaning, where quality is considered having regard to a variety of stakeholders having an interest in higher education and each having the potential to think about quality in different ways. In particular the early works of Vroeijenstijn, (1992) Middlehurst (1992) and Harvey and Green (1993) highlight the importance and value of considering quality from a variety of stakeholder perspectives.

Vroeijenstijn (1991) suggested that all parties have an interest in quality, but not everyone has the same idea about it. It seems that Middlehurst (1992) agreed, and extended the argument discussing that most ideas about quality are value-related and judgemental, and that it is the kind of education that becomes a matter of dispute between various stakeholders in the HE sector. Whilst reference to the ‘kind of education’ is open to various interpretations, in its broadest sense it can be considered the experience of students in their educational environment. Middlehurst asks the following question,

which over a decade later draws different responses: Where should legitimate authority for defining quality in higher education lie?. Not surprisingly, these responses are stakeholder-relative.

The oft-cited work of Harvey and Green (1993) focussed on the impact of different conceptions of quality from various stakeholder groups as influencing assessments of quality, and the importance of understanding these different conceptions to assist in understanding their preferences in relation to the quality issue. Harvey and Green contend that ‘this is not a different perspective on the same things but different perspectives on different things with the same label’ (Harvey & Green 1993, p.10). In their deconstruction of the concept of quality, the authors identified five categories or ways of thinking about quality. Key aspects of each of the Harvey and Green categories are summarised as follows:

Exception – Distinctive, embodied in excellence, passing a minimum set of standards
Perfection - Zero defects, getting things right the first time (focus on process as opposed to inputs and outputs)

Fitness for purpose – Relates quality to a purpose, defined by the provider

Value for money – A focus on efficiency and effectiveness, measuring outputs against inputs. A populist notion of quality (government)

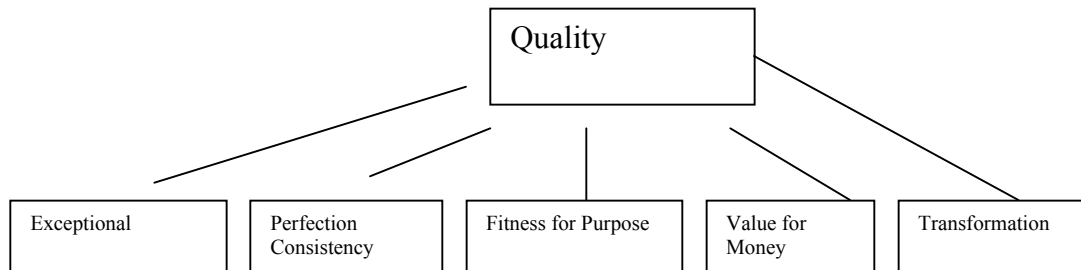
Transformation – A qualitative change; education is about doing something to the student as opposed to something for the consumer: includes concepts of enhancing and empowering: democratisation of the process, not just outcomes.

Each of these categories, whilst identified separately has the potential to overlap at the margin. In this way, stakeholder conceptions of quality may not ‘fit’ only one of the five categories and the Harvey and Green (1993) categories can be viewed as a matrix of quality. Elsewhere it has been referred to as a heuristic framework for attempting to define quality (Lomas 2002).

Accepting the notion that different stakeholders may hold different conceptions about quality in higher education, and that these views influence their assessment of quality, invites the next question: How do various stakeholders think about quality in higher education? The quality matrix provided by Harvey and Green (1993) provides a basis to investigate this further.

Quality is a concept and like other concepts, including conflict, dissatisfaction, guilt and forgiveness, it is not always observable. However, if we consider quality as the abstract concept and deconstruct it to reveal dimensions of quality we may better understand how different stakeholders think about quality.

De Vaus (1993) refers to ‘descending the ladder of abstraction’ as researchers endeavour to deconstruct concepts in a meaningful way. For example, if we use the categories of quality provided by Harvey and Green (1993) we can illustrate how quality can be deconstructed into its various dimensions as it may be applied to higher education. See Diagram 1 below



Distinctive	Zero Defects	Customer specified mission
	Efficient/effective	Enhancing the learner
Excellence – High Standards	Provider specified mission	Empowering the learner
Excellence – Minimum Standards		

Diagram 1. Clarifying concepts- descending the ladder of abstraction

The above diagram moves from the concept of quality to the dimensions (categories) of quality at the second level. De Vaus suggests that reference to the literature is a valid way of clarifying a concept and that in the review of that literature, we may discard certain dimensions, which do not ‘fit’ the research and thus remove some clutter from the investigation.

When considering quality in higher education it is valid to remove the second dimension of quality detailed in Diagram 1 that refers to perfection or consistency. Most would agree that higher education does not aim to produce standardized graduates, free of defects. What remains is a quality matrix that may form the basis of an analytical framework to consider quality in higher education (Lomas, 2002).

Of interest is how different stakeholder groups conceive quality because, the reluctance of academics to engage with QA systems, whether they be internal or external, may be due to conflict in conceptions of quality between, and potentially within stakeholder groups.

IDENTIFYING STAKEHOLDERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In an endeavour to identify stakeholders in higher education Parker and Jary (1995) developed a three-layer model in their analysis of change in higher education in the UK. The three levels (or layers) are labelled: National-structural (policy and structural changes at the national level that affect all universities), Organisational (changes internal to higher education – within universities) and Individual (actions motivation and goals of the individual academic).

The three-layer change model was adapted by Winter et al. (2001) as a model to assist categorisation of responses from academics to higher education reforms in Australian universities. Whilst the focus of their study is on the quality of academic work life in a comprehensive University in Australia, their analysis at the National-structural and Organisational levels assist their interpretation of responses at their level or layer of focus - the Individual level.

Both models lend support to the potential importance of the role four stakeholder groups in higher education: government, quality agencies, universities and individual academics. It is of note that students have not been specifically referred to as a separate stakeholder group by these authors. Similarly, employers, parents and society in general may legitimately have claim as an interested stakeholder in the higher education process. However, for the purpose of the discussion in this paper, the focus is on the perception of quality from four key stakeholder groups in higher education. This is not to diminish the importance of other stakeholder groups. To do so would be to decide the answer to who has the legitimacy to define quality, which is not the focus of this discussion. However, unravelling how these four stakeholder groups think about quality may assist in clarifying some of the complex issues around quality in higher education.

In Australia, there is evidence to suggest that the Australian government, quality agency (AUQA), and universities consider quality in terms of fitness for purpose (where the purpose is defined by the provider) and/or value for money. A similar conclusion is drawn by Lomas (2002) with reference to the UK system of higher education. Returning to the Australian environment, universities also, as they prepare for the first round of quality audits since 1995 are increasingly focussed on the importance of identifying goals, objectives and performance measures linked to the mission statement vision or purposes of the university. The progression and formalisation of external quality assurance monitoring, resulting in the establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) goes to the heart of the reform of higher education instigated by the Commonwealth government since the late 1980's, and reflects an approach of initiating change and then stepping back, confident of accountability via the establishment of mechanisms to ensure control of the system (Mahoney, 1987). In effect the ability to 'steer at a distance' (Vidovich 1998).

This is consistent with the New Public Sector Management (NPM) approach embraced by managers of higher education institutions in Australia and worldwide. Imported from the private sector, NPM is characterised by; policy development, management and implementation, efficiency, effectiveness and quality, performance evaluations and explicit targets and outputs and outcomes (Parker et al. 1999). An assumption of NPM is that the private sector is more efficient than the public sector and that application of commercial models of management would improve standards without the need to increase spending (Erridge et al 1994).

Having regard to the aspects associated with NPM, quality in this environment, is determined and measured using mechanisms, procedures and processes to ensure that the desired quality, however defined and measured is delivered. As the government in Australia has returned to external quality audits as the mechanism to assure, the universities themselves have moved to establish or refine internal QA systems, which include internal audits/reviews. In the same way that NPM has become the approach of

government and university managers, quality audits/reviews are conducted externally by AUQA, to assure the community at large of the quality of our universities, and conducted internally by university quality managers, to assure Chancellors, Vice-chancellors, Academic Boards, Deans and the like, of the quality of the university for which they are accountable. Government, the AUQA, and universities conceive quality as 'fitness for purpose', where the purpose is determined by the providers of the service – the university.

However, there is little if any evidence to suggest that this conceptualisation is consistent, or indeed inconsistent, with conceptualisations of quality from the perspective of academic faculty members. Mc Innes et al. (1994) when referring to the effect on academics of the first round of QA audits and measures, contends that:

"It is crucial for policy planning purposes that these effects are understood. Academics help determine the fate of policies and academic leaders need to be informed about the workforce they are charged to lead" (p.1).

Several authors suggest that there is evidence of academic distrust of administrations that are 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 faculty and confirmed their hypotheses that faculty 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), and overwhelmingly negative views with regard to the worth of quality assurance mechanisms and their effectiveness and efficiency (Mc Innes et al. 1994).

Other research that has investigated the impact of quality initiatives, quality policies and quality assurance mechanisms at the local/individual academic level (McInnes (1994), Vidovich (1998), Newton (1999) Trowler (1998) and Stensaker (1997) and found that academics adopt various behaviours to cope with what they perceive as the accountability led change driven by the quality agenda. Whilst this brief reference to the work of these authors does not do justice to their contributions to the literature, in general, they failed to find any evidence that academics at the local/departmental level of universities are embracing quality-change initiatives. In fact, as a general comment, it is suggested that the opposite more often applies. More recently, Newton (2001) reported the findings of a second phase of his research, designed to further investigate change in the quality assurance climate in the UK. Of particular interest are his findings with respect to different ways in which quality continues to be perceived by academics in the UK. Newton identifies two themes. First, that quality is conceived as 'intrusion, inspection and bureaucracy'. The second theme is that quality is conceived as 'conformist behaviour'.

The findings of these authors raises questions around the lack of engagement by academics in what universities refer to as quality assurance systems, initiatives and policies. One explanation may be that there is some form of conflict in the way academics think about quality compared to other stakeholders in higher education. Some

evidence of this potential conflict is provided by Lomas (2002) who recently found that from a survey of senior managers in the UK (PVC's, vice-principals, deans and academic registrars) that the majority perceived quality as fitness for purpose (33%) or transformation (31%). Whilst Lomas identifies his research as small scale, his findings provide some evidence about the potential for stakeholders to hold different views about quality. Of note is the fact that respondents from Lomas's research were identified as senior managers - not academics at the local level.

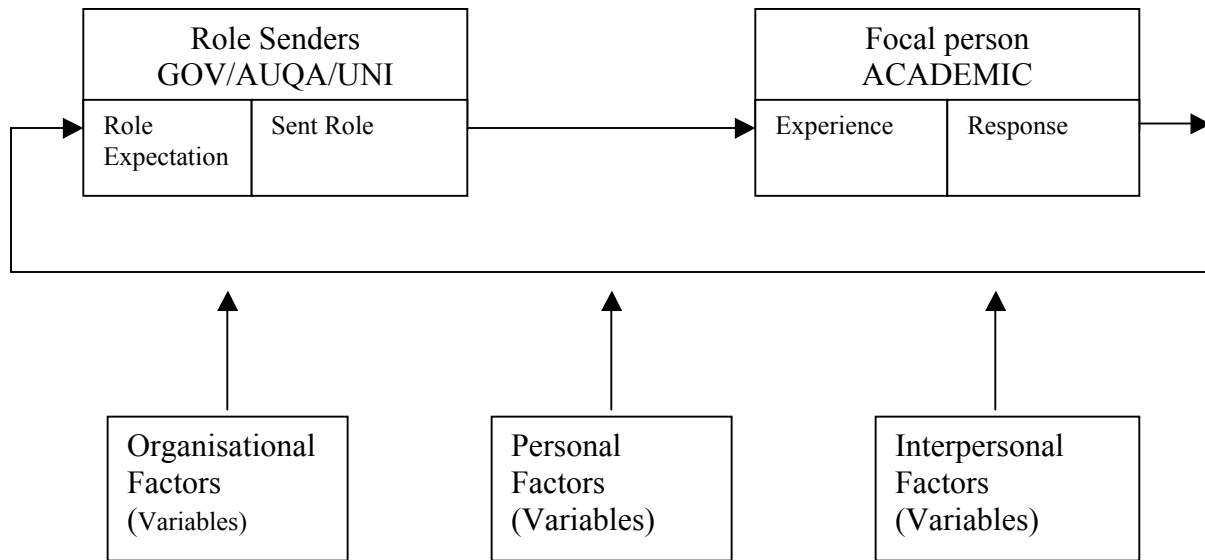
Regardless of the variety of meanings that can be attached to the concept of quality, ultimately it is academics that are held responsible for the performance of the university. As Wilson (1996, p. 156) suggests: "the quality of a university is of course critically dependent on the quality of its academic staff, who perform the research and teaching and interact with students". This is supported by other authors who acknowledge the behaviour of academics as the most critical issue to consider in determining the ultimate performance of an institution (Ferris, 1992; Fry 1995; McInnes 1992, 1994; Marginson, 2000).

Where conceptions of quality are the same or similar, a shared vision of what constitutes quality in accounting education results. However, where there are differences between stakeholders and within stakeholder groups, there is potential for conflict about the role of academics in the current university environment.

ROLE CONFLICT THEORY

Role theory encompasses both role conflict and role ambiguity theories and has been used to describe and explain stresses associated with operating as part of an organization (Kahn et al. 1964). Van Sell et al. (1981, p. 44) suggest that individuals are often "required to play a role which conflicts with their individual value systems or to play two or more roles which conflict with each other". In this instance, role conflict may be defined as a situation where there is a lack of congruence of expectations associated with a role. Role ambiguity refers to the situation where there is a lack of clarity in relation to the expectations of the role. Whilst the above is clearly an oversimplification of the complex issues associated with the behaviour of individuals in an organization, role conflict theory may provide an interesting perspective on possible reasons for the lack of engagement in quality assurance systems, policies and initiatives by academics.

The diagram below illustrates how role conflict theory may provide some insights



Adapted from Van Sell et al (1981) and Kahn et al.(1964)

The early work of Kahn et al. (1964) in their book titled: *Organizational Stress*, aptly describe the complex relationships in the model.

“Members of a role set exert role pressures to change the behaviour of a focal person. When such pressures are generated and “sent” they do not enter an otherwise empty field; the focal person is already in role, already behaving, already maintaining some kind of equilibrium among the disparate forces and motives which he experiences. ...the stronger the pressures from role senders toward changes in behaviour of the focal person, the greater the conflict created for him (Kahn et al, 1964, authors’ emphasis).

The suggestion in this discussion is that where conceptions of quality differ between the roles senders (government, AUQA, university) and the role receiver/focal person, (academics) there is potential for conflict, particularly where the value-laden notion of quality is at the heart of the conflict. Clearly, a number of factors or variables – organisational, personal and interpersonal, will determine the nature and extent of this potential conflict.

If we consider that it is the conceptions of quality as fitness for purpose or value for money that has been adopted by government, AUQA and universities, role theory may help to explain the lack of engagement with quality assurance systems by academics at the local level. This is in contrast to the view that academics are inflexible, resistant to change and ignoring the quality agenda in higher education. It may be that academics conceive quality differently to these other stakeholders, valuing different aspects to those measured and monitored under the current quality regime.

As an academic at the departmental/local level interested in issues around quality in higher education I have observed my changing environment, discussed the changes with colleagues, and attended too many ‘quality’ conferences where academics from Schools and Departments who are still directly involved in the process of teaching and learning are in the minority. I perceive a degree of conflict in the current requirements of the role of academics in a ‘quality-focused’ environment, and that which academics view as their responsibilities.

Potentially, role theory may contribute to explaining this disturbing perception, which makes it an area worthy of further consideration and research.

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