

## Quality: A Higher Education Perspective

Assefa Berhane\*

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the new focus on *quality in higher education*; that is, the transformation of teaching and learning process from teacher-centred to learner-centred, and to a process of resource and performance interactions. Moreover, the paper deals with higher education and desirable student outcomes, quality oriented institutional characteristics, performance measures of higher learning institutions, and policy mechanisms that support quality higher education.

The common views of quality in education given by educators and policy makers are: quality as reputation, quality as resource and inputs, quality as a process, quality as content, quality as outputs and outcomes, and quality as value added (Adams, 1993).

*Reputation:* the existence in the minds of most people a folklore about which are the *best* educational institutions in a country. However, the basis for reputation often includes information or assumptions about inputs and outputs.

*Inputs:* fiscal resources, number and qualification of faculty, student quality, size, pedagogical materials and curriculum, extent of facilities and overall prestige.

*Process:* reflects not only inputs or results, but also the nature of the intra-institutional interaction of students, faculty, and others; the whole institutional environment.

*Content:* reflects the particular bias of a community, an institution or a country toward a body of knowledge, skills or information.

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*Outputs or outcomes:* achievement in knowledge, skills, entrance ratios to next level of education, income, and occupational status of graduates. This shows how well an institution prepares students to become responsible citizens in skills, attitudes and values relevant to the country's needs.

*Value added:* a measure of change; how the students have changed because of the learning program, the culture, and the norms of the institution; how the institution helps students to achieve their potential or enlarge human capacities.

However, the discussion of quality in higher education has been mainly related to the amount of resources and an institution's reputation (Coate, 1995).

In higher education, resource alone is not the panacea to all the problems related to quality issues. There is a belief, that when resources are plentiful, there is a possibility that some *weak academic programmes in a college or university may slide along for many years without systematic diagnosis of their weaknesses* (Balderston, 1995: 295). One solution to address quality issues is an institution to become a customer-focused. And, to be customer-focused, institutions must understand *customers' [students'] minds, give them caring, personalized service and provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful* (Coate, 1995:131).

However, critics state that defining quality, as meeting customers' needs does not necessarily imply that the customer is always best placed to determine what quality is or whether quality is present. Students might be in a position to state their short-term needs, but they may not have *enough knowledge and experience to know what they need in the long term* (Green, 1994:17).

Hence, quality is not a unitary concept; it is a relative concept that different stakeholders (students, faculty, student affairs staff, government, the employers, donors, and so on) in higher education have different priorities and their focus of attention may be different. For example, quality for students, student affairs staff, and faculty might be on the process of education while for employers the focus of attention and priorities might be on the outputs of higher education. Therefore, according to Green (1994), definitions of quality vary, *quality must be defined in terms of qualities, with recognition that an institution might be of high quality in relation to one factor but low quality in relation to another* (p. 17).

Now, it is essential to see in some depth the quality of education from the viewpoint of process and student outcomes.

### **Quality as a Process**

Quality as a process suggests that *not only inputs or results, but also the nature of intra-institutional interaction of students, faculty and other educators, or quality of life of the programme, school or system, is valued* (Adams, 1993: 6). These may be achieved by applying new methodologies, and strong educational leadership and administrative support. The leaders of universities and colleges should encourage open communications, push decision making to the lower structural level, and build systems that motivate people to grow and develop. Besides these, school leaders should create a convenient *institutional climate* that enhances and supports learning.

To Perry (1994), the overall *climate and ethos* of an institution are the major contributors to the richness of student experience, far beyond the specific experience within the classroom contact on an individual course. Campus ethos shows a perspective *about an institution's moral character and imposes a coherence on collective experience by reconciling individual and group roles with the institution's aspiration and public images* (Kuh, 1993: 22). Geertz also stated that ethos creates a *sense of intrinsic obligation: it not only encourages devotion, it demands*

*it; it not only induces intellectual assent, it enforces emotional commitment (Kuh, 1993:22).*

Guskin (1994) stated that there should be a shift from a college that exists to provide instruction to a college that exists to provide learning. To Guskin resource may not produce significant change in the academic area. He said, a significant restructuring of the role of faculty and administrative members may increase productivity. Creating an environment that directly focuses on activities that enhance student learning, maximizing faculty-student interaction, integrating new technologies fully into the student learning process, and enhancing student learning through peer interaction brings quality in higher education.

Similarly, Wingspread Group report also urged on the redesign of higher learning institutions to align the *entire educational enterprise with the personal, civic, and workplace needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (1993:19). Besides this, it also stated that *putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will mean overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular, and other architecture of post secondary education on most campuses of higher learning institutions* (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993:14).

It is inevitable that the current model of higher education will be changed. But the key to success will be the *transformation of the teaching and learning process from one that is teacher-centered to one that is learner-centred, to transform the paradigm of the 'community of scholars' to one that is defined by communities of learners* (O' Banion 1997a:35).

However, the difficult thing to change is *the implicit assumption held by most faculty that higher institution is inherently a selective environment. If students do not perform well, it's their problem or fault, irrespective of how they were taught, the environment in which they were asked to learn, or differences in their learning styles* (Guskin, 1994:25). Furthermore, Guskin states:

Focusing on student learning turns our thinking about the future of our colleges and universities *upside-down: from faculty productivity to student productivity, from faculty disciplinary interests to what students need to learn, from faculty teaching styles to student learning styles, from classroom teaching to student learning* (p. 25).

It has to be clear that *society's needs will be served if colleges and universities wholeheartedly commit themselves to providing students with opportunities to experience and reflect on the world within and beyond the campus* (Wingspread Group, 1993:10); that is, contributing to the well-being of others, working with the agricultural, industrial, social, etc., enterprises that contribute to the development of society.

To attain these transformations, universities and colleges need to have mission statements that highlight that their existence is to enhance and support learning. *People can learn their roles and responsibilities, understand why [an] institution works the way it does, and develop a shared vision of the institution's future* if only they know the mission of their institution (Kuh et.al., 1997:421).

Therefore, according to Boggs and Michael (1997), college or university faculty, instead of being primarily lecturers, should be facilitators of learning and designers of learning environments. The student affairs staff, instead of being seen as supporters of the faculty and of the instruction process, should be perceived as important contributors to a campus climate that enhances and supports learning. Hence the faculty *will be part of a learning team that includes all of the college's [or university's] staff and the students* (Boggs and Michael, 1997: 207).

Similarly, the students should not be seen as passive vessels to be filled with the knowledge provided by the faculty during lecture hours, but active constructors of knowledge and demonstrators of skills. Instead of being *individualistic and competitive*, students need to be *co-operative and collaborative* both inside and outside of the classroom (Boggs and Michael, 1997: 208).

In quality higher education, the purpose of a college or university is not to transfer knowledge but to create an environment and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make them active members of communities which can make discoveries and solve problems (Barr and Tagg, 1995).

### **Desirable Student Outcomes**

According to Education Commission of the States (1995), desirable student outcomes commonly suggested by education policy makers, business leaders, college and university leaders, students and representatives of regional accrediting associations are the following:

#### *Higher Order, Applied Problem-Solving Abilities*

It is not enough that students simply poses analytical skills; they should be able to use these skills in complex, real-world setting, i.e., a high level of practical creativity:

- creativity and resourcefulness
- thinking on one's feet
- being a reflective practitioner
- finding the right problems to solve
- identifying new solutions or weaving together a diverse set of thoughts to create a new thought

#### *Enthusiasm For Continuous Learning:*

- openness and trainability
- preparedness for continuous learning
- skills and inclination to cope with changing circumstances both on the job and in one's life
- ability to access new information and learn how to do new things

*Interpersonal Skills, Including Communication And Collaboration:*

- oral communication skills needed for effective teamwork and communication with non-specialists
- listening and mutual assistance

*A Strong Sense Of Responsibility For Personal And Community Action:*

- personal integrity
- ethical behaviour
- civil behaviour

Noted examples include honestly, following through on customer or co-worker needs, maintaining collective property, acting responsibly, participating in public service activities and volunteer work, and being an informed citizen.

*Ability To Bridge Cultural And Linguistic Barriers:*

- multiculturalism and global awareness
- awareness of and respect for ethnic and national differences
- expressions of tolerance
- actual experience in dealing with diversity
- foreign or second language skills required for intercultural communication

*A Well-Developed Sense Of Professionalism:*

- self-discipline and the ability to understand and work through an organizational structure to get things done
- expectation of *civility* (including appropriate dress and behaviour in social settings)

### **Quality Oriented Institutional Characteristics**

Although the Education Commission of the United States (1995) considers student outcomes as very important to define quality undergraduate education, it also emphasised quality oriented institutional characteristics.

Some of the quality oriented institutional characteristics are mentioned below.

#### *Student-centeredness*

This orientation has to be an institutional culture rather than simply a component element of instruction:

- responsiveness to the needs of students should be the core of an institution's mission
- a faculty highly committed to teaching and personally attentive to students
- a focus on the development of the whole student
- readily available support services designed to ensure student success

#### *Commitment to specific good practices in instruction*

This is an organisational culture that values:

- High expectations
  - both the institution and its faculty members must set high expectations and make active effort to help students meet them;
  - students learn more effectively when expectations for learning are high but attainable levels and when these expectations are communicated clearly from the beginning.

- Respect for diverse talents and learning styles - Instructional approaches that actively tap prior student and faculty experiences, and highlight the differences in those experiences, can be particularly effective.
- Active learning - provide students multiple opportunities to actively exercise and demonstrate skills
- Assessment and prompt feedback - frequent feedback to students on their own performance
- Collaboration:
  - engage students in a team effort rather than working on their own
  - faculty act as coaches, working with students as joint participants in achieving learning goals
- Adequate time on task - more time devoted to learning yields greater payoffs in terms of what and how much is learned, therefore, give students adequate time on task
- The use of *real world* instructional experiences such as formal practice, internships or group projects
- Easily accessible tools of learning, library and information resources or computing and instructional technology
- Out of class contact with faculty through advising or informal conversations

*Quality management practices:*

- coherence of goals
- incentives and rewards
- organisational structures and actual behaviours
- monitoring the achievement of self-set goals

- monitoring *consumer* needs and satisfactions
- continuous quality improvement techniques and externally developed standards

*Efficiency and integrity of operation:*

- cost versus benefit
- presence of resource information and outcome data

### **Measuring Quality**

Once quality is defined different principles can be used to guide an attempt to assess the quality of a higher learning institution. The principles include multiple measures, comparative measures, contextual data reporting, information about both absolute outcomes and educational value added, external sources of information, etc. (Education Commission of the States, 1995).

Among the most prominent types of performance measures, the following specific ones are suggested:

*The successful and timely completion by students of their educational programme*

*Student performance after graduation:*

- job placement and performance
- employment history
- performance in future education
- contribution to community

*Direct assessment of graduating students' abilities:*

- emphasis on hands-on experience
- in discussions about applied problem solving

*Inventories of instructional and organisational goal practices*

- presence of clear learning goals and expectations of students at all levels
- demonstration of institutional self-assessment and monitoring practices, especially those involving feedback from consumers
- information about student access to needed departments and services
- measures of student access to faculty and the deployment of faculty to undergraduate instruction

*Direct observation through site visits**Assessing an institute by input measures*

Although higher learning institutions are different and having different missions quality assurance mechanisms are both necessary and possible. Therefore, the following significant areas of agreement of the Education Commission of the states (1995) should be taken into account.

*Assuring quality is not, by itself, enough to discharge accountability:*

- For quality-assurance mechanisms to play a part in accountability, cost effectiveness, return on investment and the appropriate use of public funds, etc., must be recognized.
- *Academic self-regulation should remain a component of any future process of quality assurance.*
- Self-regulation through peer review and meaningful accreditation, with active participation of stakeholders should continue as a key part of a national higher education
- In quality assurance agency.

*Quality assurance must involve visible common standards*

*Quality assurance must be done in public and its results reported to the public*

Ashworth (1994) also identified a 13 measures model of approach to performance funding of Texas institutions of higher learning. Some of the 13 measures suggested to rate the performance of the institutions are indicated below:

Teaching goals::

- *Undergraduate Degrees*
  - *Goal:* Increase the education level of citizens of the state.
  - *Measure:* Number of undergraduate degrees awarded
- *Course Completers*
  - *Goal:* Increase the efficiency of teaching function
  - *Measure:* The number of courses completed with a grade other than some form of *incomplete, withdrawn or dropped*.
- *Remediation*
  - *Goals:* Increase the success rate of poorly prepared students.
  - *Measure:* The number of students who have failed one or more of the required academic skills examination and
  - *Goal:* Increase the success rate of poorly prepared subsequently passed all sections of that examination.
- *Minority Ethnic Groups and Women Grades*
  - *Goal:* Increase the successful participation rates of students from minority ethnic groups and women.
  - *Measure:* The number of students from minority ethnic groups and women graduated.

- *Critical Skills*
  - *Goal:* Increase the number of graduates with skills critical to the Texas economy
  - *Measure:* The number of graduates with degrees in disciplines identified on a national quality assurance agency list of critical skills

#### Research Goals:

- *Externally Funded Research*
  - *Goal:* Increase the external support of research in Texas universities.
  - *Measure:* Funds expended for the conduct of research and development from sources other than state or local funds.
- *Intellectual Property*
  - *Goal:* Increase the commercialisation of research developed in Texas universities
  - *Measure:* Income from research-related intellectual property.

#### Public Service Goals:

- *Faculty service*
  - *Goal:* Increase public service contribution of faculty in communities, public schools, agriculture, business and industry.
  - *Measure:* The number of faculty documented to be involved in a required level of service activities.

### **Policy Mechanisms that Support Quality Higher Education**

Governments can induce higher learning institutions to be engaged with higher education quality issues by introducing fiscal incentives,

accountability mechanisms, by direct intervention or giving technical assistance (Education Commission of the States, 1995).

### *Fiscal Incentives*

Have policies that use financial reward or directed investment to ensure institutions engage in valued practices or attain valued outcomes:

- providing institutions with up to an additional X % of their base funding for outcomes such as student achievement, as well as other statistical measures of quality.
- directing resources toward specified institutional investments and practices, and restricts expenditures to such practices:
  - reducing lower division English class sizes to promote writing achievement;
  - providing fund to institutions for investments in computing and instructional technology;
  - funding toward the development of senior *capstone experiences* i.e., a senior research thesis or individual project.
- funding for institutional experimentation with new quality improvement techniques, for example, funds for *excellence* programmes.

### *Accountability Mechanisms*

#### *Institutional assessment mandates*

- allow institutions to set their own goals for assessment and specify the particular forms of assessment they will use to demonstrate or determine goal achievement such as
  - achievement in the major fields
  - retention and graduation rates
  - student and alumni satisfaction

- *Common performance measures*
  - requesting national public higher learning institutions to report results on a common set of statistical performance indicators like inputs, good practice measures, as well as outputs:
    - number of undergraduates directly involved in faculty research activities
    - the proportions of graduating students involved in capstone, etc.

#### *Direct Intervention*

- *Mandated instructional practice or curriculum content*
  - ensure that certain topics, such as HIV/AIDS or professional ethics, are taught or certain instructional practices are engaged in the curriculum
- *Mandated faculty workloads or requirements*
  - specify how instructional resources, particularly faculty, are deployed (place clear restrictions on their deployment)
  - specify minimum teaching workload for full-time faculty in public higher learning institutions
  - requirements like faculty English proficiency

#### *Technical Assistance*

- Disseminate good practice information or provide direct government agencies assistance to institutions in improving education delivery. For example, sponsoring periodic conferences or workshops on topics of education improvements, annual countrywide assessment conferences, country-wide conferences to disseminate the lessons learned by institutions in piloting new programmes.

## Concluding Remarks

In quality higher education, it is not only resource that brings about quality, but it is the interaction of resource and performance.

While the preparation of faculty members and character of institutional facilities are important resources for student learning, it is far from clear that there is a straight-line relationship between them and the fact of a student learning (Guskin, 1994: 25).

In quality higher education many types of learning happen at the same time for individual learners. Different learners simultaneously follow different learning paths. Learning is not competing, it is *co-evolving* where students' *intelligence* is based on their learning community (O'Banion, 1997b). The roles of faculty and students are flexible. Materials and teaching methods vary with the interest and learning styles of students.

In quality higher education decision making is shared among all the college or university community. The faculty are empowered so that they can be involved in and assume leadership, and hence be able to move teaching to learning. The student affairs staff is no more only service provider, but part and parcel of the academic concern of the college or university.

Moreover, as the number of public and private higher learning institutions and programmes are increasing, students and their families expect to have reliable and meaningful information about the quality of educational services delivered. Employers and others who rely on educational services and credentials also need to have basic information that higher learning institutions have complied with and met certain measurable standards of quality like accreditation status, standards of good performance and so on.

The importance of performance measures in higher education is growing. Performance measures are expected to bring about positive changes in teaching and learning. Countries are adopting performance

measures of higher education to inform consumers and to distribute funds to higher learning institutes. During budget hearing, college and university presidents are starting to talk about *students and their successes, and not just about money as an end in itself* (SHEEO/NCES, 1998: 5).

Therefore, higher education should develop and use quality indicators that show the role it plays in society and students' lives. In Romer's words, *the public will not tolerate institutions that cannot demonstrate quality in their work* (1995: 5).

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