

Quality goes online

New challenges for distance education

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Abstract: In an era of competition in a global education market where distance education methods are growing in use via the Internet and quality assurance is taking on greater importance, the means and rationales for ensuring quality in online education in universities is under-theorised. This paper describes current debates within quality assurance and online delivery in Higher Education in Australia and discusses five perspectives of quality and their implications for online distance education. Considering these perspectives as particular discursive formations it is possible to construct new understandings of both quality education and the role of online delivery in the future of teaching and learning. These understandings are then tested by critiquing two recent contributions to the field of quality assurance of online education.

Key words: Online Education, Quality Assurance, Distance Education

1. QUALITY IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

While quality is a notion that been important in Australian universities for a considerable time, Australian Federal Government focus on it has recently accelerated in parallel with developments in other countries, notably the UK, New Zealand and the USA. During the years 1993-1995 the Australian government instigated three 'quality rounds' where institutions were rewarded differentially for reports on quality, including quality in teaching and learning. Since that time a number of reports and proposals have been produced but little actual government action in this arena occurred between 1995 and 1999 when the then Minister of Education, David Kemp, made forays into the field (Kemp, 1999).

In recent years the quality discourse has moved. In the early 1990s there was a focus on *promoting and encouraging* quality, through grants to

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universities for innovations and investigations, by rewarding institutions for demonstrations of quality through external audits, and by provision of targeted funding for equity programs. Then moves were made to notions of *assuring* quality, through 'benchmarking', policy frameworks, and the annual profiling exercise.

Most recently, through the establishment of the Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA), an independent bureaucracy has been established to both define quality and carry out audits with public reports to demonstrate how universities are complying. AUQA is not a government agency like a department, but is a company owned by the government. It conducts audits of universities' quality assurance processes according to criteria the universities set themselves. The activities of AUQA began in 2002.

This 'quality' discourse is one of containment and of minimising risk. It aims to provide guarantees, not necessarily of quality per se, but of the carrying out of the atomised processes by which particular 'products' are claimed to be produced. Thus it creates languages and activities that prescribe and proscribe, while all the time maintaining the supposed 'independence' of the organisational unit under its gaze: the university. Implicit in these policy positions is an idealised notion of what a university is and consequently, what a good university is. Australian universities are of course, even given the homogenising effect of the market, very diverse institutions (Marginson & Considine, 1999). The contradictions inherent in having a national quality assurance process for such diverse objects of surveillance opens cracks through which discordant voices can be heard.

2. POSSIBLE DEFINITIONS OF QUALITY

Lee Harvey has defined five perspectives on quality in relation to higher education (Harvey & Green, 1993). These involve viewing quality as exception, as perfection, as fitness for purpose, as value for money and as transformative (p.9). Each of these perspectives involves different assumptions of the role of the university, of the importance of processes and outcomes, and each has different implications for online distance education. These perspectives are now briefly described and their implications for understanding the relationships between quality and online distance education methods are delineated.

Quality as exceptional. In this view of quality put by Harvey, it is often not expected that the question, 'is this a quality university' needs to be asked, as it is assumed that quality is a concept which is fundamental to its existence. In this elitist view, a quality university has the best students, the best resources and the best reputation. Outranking other universities not by

objective measures, this sort of university is known to be a quality institution from its history and the achievements of its graduates. This absolutist view of quality relies on absolute standards that often go unstated, but should any attempt at measurement take place, then the sheer quality of these inputs and outputs are enough to answer any quality questions. Such an exclusive institution is, by definition, not available to all and suggests an online distance education operation that is relies on small scale but high quality materials, probably including audio and video of 'star lecturers' who are expert in their fields. Leveraging its high quality brand, such an institution can charge high prices for its offerings and can provide high quality individual online tutoring and coaching to support its students.

Quality as perfection. Harvey provides two catch cries for this view of quality - 'zero defects' and 'getting things right first time' As such a standard is in theory attainable by any institution, this view of quality, while hard to attain, is nevertheless more inclusive than the 'quality as exceptional' view. Quality here involves conforming to specifications laid down by the institution or external standards body as being the hallmarks of a quality educational provider. Rather than attempting to measure particular outputs of the institution, the focus here is on the prevention of problems through the development of a quality culture. This involves the devolution of responsibility for quality throughout the organisation to ensure that each step in the educational process meets particular standards. For online distance education this means the compliance to international technical standards for online delivery such as IMS (<http://www.imsglobal.org/>) and SCORM (<http://www.adlnet.org>) for the production and delivery of resources. The technologies must be highly reliable, providing internationally acceptable uptimes. Students must be guaranteed appropriate turnaround times for things such as technical assistance and marking of work. The usability and accessibility of the online environment must be of an agreed standard. This quality online provider can deliver to any scale. Indeed, given the cost of this version of online quality, it would need to be a large-scale operation to be viable.

Quality as fitness for purpose. In this view of quality, Harvey replaces the absolutes of standards with the needs of either the customer (the student) or of the business needs of the institution, as expressed through mission statements and quality assurance plans. Quality is defined as being present when these needs are met. Rather than checking the outcomes, then, it is necessary to ensure that agreed quality processes are carried out. This leaves open the question of what appropriate aims should be. Quality here is determined by customer satisfaction or by the meeting of Key Performance Indicators. This requires a clear specification of what the institution is offering its students, and should their needs coincide with this, they can

study with a degree of comfort that those needs will be met. For online learners, this requires a degree of sophistication about what they need to learn, how they would best access their learning experiences and how this can best be achieved online. This implies a reasonable degree of technical competence. The student here is an active respondent to their online teaching, providing feedback to the provider, which will respond to their needs. This assumes a dynamic educational programme able to be modified in response to this feedback.

Quality as value for money. 'You get what you pay for' is a reality in the commercial world and can be transferred to the educational sphere. While brand can be important here, price and service are also important dimensions of Harvey's quality question. Service becomes a more important issue here and different levels of service may be bought for varying prices. Here the student is treated as a rational and informed consumer in an educational marketplace. The ultimate test of quality is that the institution is accountable to its stakeholders and can compete at particular price points. This raises the importance of efficiency and cost effectiveness in order to fill a particular niche in the market. Not only are the prices and services quantified in general terms, but often customer charters are frequently put in place to provide service guarantees to students. Hence students will be informed of the type and quality of service they can expect from their online education provider before beginning (and paying for) their education. Different services, such as intensive tutoring, online library access or technical assistance can be bought. Because of the price sensitivity and the mobility of the students here, recruitment and retention of students is important and student 'churn' or 'burnout' becomes an important consideration.

Quality as transformative. This view of quality is student centred, not product centred. Here, Harvey's customer is not always right, but is offered a transformative experience rather than a simple service. The aim is to challenge and to change the customer, not merely do something for the customer. This brings with it notions of 'adding value' to the student and involving the student as an active participant in the educational process. Not only is feedback accepted and acted upon, but the educational transactions are built around the student as an active participant in the construction of their own learning program. An online provider that espouses the transformative view of quality will allow students to control and transform the online environment for themselves and their peers. In this institution the student moves from a consumer of education to an author, collaborator and critic of their online environment. They choose for themselves the experiences they wish to access in customised and personalised courseware. This requires the provider to deliver their online environment in a flexible manner allowing the student to construct a personal learning pathway and

View of quality	How you know it	Implications for quality assurance	Implications for online Distance Education
exception	Best students Best resources Best reputation Best history Best graduates	Absolutist view of quality Absolute and objective standards Audit is obvious from objective measures Elitism	Small scale operation High cost materials 'Star lecturers' Leverage brand Individual tutors / coaches
perfection	Zero defects Getting things right first time	Conformance to specification Prevention rather than inspection Quality culture - devolution of responsibility rather than external checking Each step in process meets standards Inclusive	International standards Technical reliability Turnaround time benchmarks Usability and accessibility Any scale desired
fitness for purpose	Purpose intended by customer or provider is met Focus on quality processes Unclear what appropriate aims should be	Customer satisfaction measures Institutional mission determines quality assurance process checks Inclusive if students' needs can be met	Clear specifications for offering Pre-determined benchmarks Post-check of whether the customer or the provider met what they set out to achieve Online savvy students Student feedback on educational design
value for money	Ignores brand alone Service for customers Provides accountability to stakeholders Economic individualism and student as consumer	Competition Efficiency Performance indicators Market as the determinant Consumer charters	Price and service quantification Higher and lower levels of service for a price Recruitment and retention important
transformative	Student centred, not product centric Not service <i>for</i> a customer but doing something <i>to</i> the customer Transforming of students	Enhance the participant - adding value Valuing of students' feedback Empowering the customer - student involvement	Student-run course components Student as author, collaborator and critic Student compiles courseware for their own needs - flexible delivery

Table 1. Views of quality and their implications for online distance education. Following Harvey & Green(1993)

requiring teachers to respond to individual and group needs in dynamic ways.

Harvey's five views of quality in higher education have different implications for online distance education. These are summarised in table 1.

3. THE DISCURSIVE FORMATIONS OF QUALITY

A corollary of the discussion above is that no single view represents a comprehensive definition of quality, nor are the views mutually exclusive. Components of them could be used by universities, depending on the purpose for which their quality agenda is constructed. The view of quality taken up by universities will construct new actions by teachers and students, and new representations of the characteristics of quality online learning.

The language used by Harvey to describe these views of quality, and the ways in which they can be taken up by a university, constitute a discursive formation (Foucault, 1969). In this concept the relationship between worldviews and social actions are represented by heteroglossic voices (Bakhtin, 1981) which are

...systematically related to one another in ways which correspond to the macro-social and political relations among the groups which speak them (Lemke, 1999 p.27)

Considering Harvey's views of quality as discursive formations allows the social relationships between policy agents, teachers and learners to be read and to thus see 'quality' not as a sterile notion but as a social organiser of action.

As a way to test these ideas, two approaches to quality assurance for online distance education by Australian academics (McNaught, 2002; Oliver, 2001) are now discussed and analysed in terms of the five views of quality described above as discursive formations. Space does not allow a thorough textual analysis, but it is hoped that a brief discussion of the themes prescribed by these papers will allow the reader to begin to hear their discordant voices.

4. IMPLEMENTING QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR ONLINE COURSES

Carmel McNaught (2002) describes the approach to quality assurance for online courses at RMIT University. She describes RMIT as a 'corporate university' and constructs quality as ensurable through policy managed from

the centre of the organisation and composed of three components: educational design, peer review and formal evaluation. The educational design is 'signed off' by a Director of Teaching Quality within each faculty according to an online checklist. The peer review process is a 1-2 hour meeting run by the Director of Teaching Quality. IT staff are also involved in this review. The formal evaluation involves formal student satisfaction surveys. This quality process owes much to the 'perfection' view of quality, by referring to set standards and placing faith in process. The reliance on student feedback and reference to institutional aims relates to a 'fitness for purpose' view of quality and the appeal to peer review is an attempt to create a transformative environment, but more for the teacher than the learner. McNaught constructs quality assurance as a management task aiming for the perfect process.

Oliver (2001) considers quality assurance processes for online learning in general terms rather than focusing on the processes in a single university. He defines four issues that need to be addressed by universities to ensure quality of their online offerings. These are cost effectiveness, achieving and maintaining quality, ensuring access and equity and sustaining online delivery. He describes five strategies by which these issues can be addressed. These are attending to teacher expertise, student readiness, IT infrastructure, designing reusable learning objects and creating reusable learning designs. By appealing to the cost effectiveness and efficiencies of 'reusability', Oliver draws upon the 'value for money' view of quality, while his focus on IT infrastructure, reliability and service provision reflects a view of quality as 'perfection'. His 'perfect' online university is one involving 'settings which are sustainable and provide a means for ongoing and self-supporting activity'. Within this environment student satisfaction is paramount, recalling the 'fitness for purpose' view of quality. Oliver constructs quality assurance as the means by which the ideal student achieves the maximum satisfaction.

McNaught and Oliver make useful contributions to understanding the meanings of quality for online distance education. By emphasising different views of quality, they construct differing understandings of the ideal online teaching and learning environment and as a result prescribe different actions on the part of teachers, students and the institutions with which they learn.

5. CONCLUSION

Our understandings of the impact of online technologies on the methods, rationales and theories of distance education are developing as their importance and ubiquity increase. The increasing use of quality discourses in shaping the frameworks within which universities operate will influence how

these technologies are valued, implemented and evaluated. As distance educators, it is important for us to appreciate how these discourses operate in order for us to harness the pedagogical and political possibilities they create.

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