

WHAT IS 'QUALITY' IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

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A haircut

In courses on university educational quality, I tend to use 'having a haircut' as a case about what quality is. Is it about the waiting time and or ease of scheduling an appointment? Is it about the (perceived) quality of your hairdo? Is it how you're handled by the barber? (Some fifteen years ago, I had a barber fiercely pulling my hair while cutting it – I never returned.) Is it the quality of the coffee? Of the conversation? Of the styling of the hair salon? The fee you pay? Whether you need to pay cash? Can one actually assess this type of 'quality' objectively?

The discussions of this case tend to move into a direction of 'core quality' and 'periferal quality', and to 'quality is in the eye of the beholder'.

Quality in Higher Education

There are a number of conspicuous differences between a haircut and Higher Education. For one, the quality of HE is massively more important than the quality of a haircut. As a consequence, many stakeholders have a say in HE quality and HE quality 'assurance'. Stakeholders include: government, society, students, and teachers. Moreover, in HE, quality is not something one can deliver as were it a shop or manufacturing plant. In HE, quality is produced in a cooperative situation involving students, their teachers and other HE staff members. Students are not 'clients' – although clientalism is on HE's radar screen –, nor are students 'raw materials'. Students are what they are: learners.

However, the haircut and HE do have something in common: it is extremely hard to find useful objective parameters, 'yardsticks' to determine the quality of higher education.

In the absence of yardsticks we can rely on, things can, and have, become pretty complicated.

For one, as Pfeffer et al. (1999) have indicated, ambiguity nurtures politics. Ten years ago, for example, Dutch government, decided on introducing accreditation for HE degree programmes. The accreditation system includes external peer reviewing – resembling jury sports – and a set of standards and guidelines for HE institutions to adhere to.

In 2006, Jethro Newman of the University of Chester presented a paper titled 'What is quality?' to the 1st European Forum for Quality Assurance in Munich. He found that there is no authoritative definition of 'HE quality', nor can there be one. He suggested a pragmatic approach: "quality as 'stakeholder-relative'".

Quality? Why not Quality Assurance?

We chose to use the generic term 'quality' for two reasons. The first is, that 'quality' in itself needs highlighting in any discussion on 'quality assurance', 'quality enhancement' and 'quality management'. The second reason is, that terms can add ambiguity. We chose not to use the term 'quality management' (nor any of its kindreds, like 'total quality management'). This is, because at

our university, 'management' is not a word we frequently use in academia. Furthermore, we tend to view 'quality assurance' ('kwaliteitszorg' in Dutch) as a term specifying maintaining quality at a certain level. We prefer to use 'quality enhancement' or 'quality improvement'. And we use 'quality accountability' for the process of being accountable for quality.

Further resources and information

This note is in the Quality of Education Toolbox. This toolbox contains some additional resources, like the 2006 presentation from Newman (see above).

There are three more Toolboxes:

- Quality and TOM
- Evaluation of Education
- Accreditation of Education.

These toolboxes contain many additional resources, including web links to parts of UT's website.