Measuring Quality

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In the UK, higher education is in the midst of a huge experiment. The shift of the funding and the allocation of university places from the government to students are changing many aspects of higher education. One stated aim of this move was to improve quality with the competition to attract students leading universities to offer students a richer experience. What count as quality and richer student experiences in this context raises all kinds of questions about what counts as a good undergraduate education and about the appropriate nature of the higher education that is offered by universities. They also have important implications for how quality and student experiences of higher education are improved.

In this piece, I examine debates around quality and student experiences of higher education and consider three different ways in which quality might be thought about and their implications for the improvement of quality. However, because of the role of personal values in shaping one's position on quality, I first want to outline my own engagement with teaching and learning in higher education and consider how it has shaped my position in relation to these issues.

A personal engagement with quality

My position on quality has been informed by my experiences as a student and member of staff in both further and higher education. My undergraduate degree was in Applied Social Science at Kingston Polytechnic (although it became a university in the year that I graduated). I basically studied the politics, sociology, economics and philosophy of welfare. The teaching we had was brilliant and the students were from a diverse range of backgrounds. From here, I managed to get British Academy funding to do a Masters in Philosophy of the Social Sciences from the London School of Economics. I hadn't realized that whilst I had studied philosophy from the perspective of social sciences at Kingston, at the LSE I would be studying the social sciences from the perspective of philosophy. I spent the first term and a half being told I wasn't making philosophical arguments and whilst I found the challenge of learning how to do this rewarding, I was shocked by the lack of care for us as a group of students. One incident summed this up for me when I began work on my dissertation. I turned up to see my supervisor and we had a useful initial chat about the topic. I then asked when we could meet again to discuss my progress and was told "No, you now go away and write it. We will not be meeting again". The contrast with my polytechnic experience was stark.

Whilst at Kingston, I had begun to get involved in peer learning schemes. First as a peer supporter of other students on my course and later as someone who supported peer supporters. Whilst at the LSE, I worked the six hours I was allowed by the British Academy at Newham College of Further Education in east London organising peer learning schemes there. Following the completion of my master's programme, I applied for a full-time job at Newham organizing peer learning schemes across the college. I worked with teachers and student on a range of programmes to design and implement schemes in which students could support each other. This included schemes on programmes such as A levels in the sciences, social sciences and humanities, GNVQs in Electronic Engineering, NVQs in

Accountancy , and HNCs in Art and Design. This work developed into a PhD in which I examined the ways in which these schemes developed, were shaped by the courses that they were supporting, and the manner in which those who acted as peer supporters developed a more social view of effective learning. In all, I spent seven years working at Newham and was struck by the dynamism and intelligence of the students and staff that I worked with.

After completing my PhD, I got a post-doctoral research job examining students' experiences of learning at the University of Oxford. As part of this I studied students' and tutors' ways of understanding tutorials at Oxford as well as the factors that affected the quality of students' learning. A few of the people I met at Oxford were truly remarkable but most were not that much different from those I had worked with in Newham. The main difference was in their sense of entitlement and certainty that they were the brightest and the best. When I suggested that the students I worked with at Newham would not understand the culture at Oxford, even those who were keen to widen participation looked at me as if I were mad. I eventually realised that Oxford was its culture. What was unfair was its claim to take the brightest and the best whereas it actually took a certain kind of student to thrive there.

These experiences have made me sceptical about accepting established hierarchies of what were considered the 'best' universities and to question the ways in which notions of quality are informed by ideas of prestige that can have little to do with the programmes that students study and their experiences whilst studying. These experiences have also informed my subsequent research into the quality of teaching and learning in universities.

Quality in higher education
How do you know the quality of a degree course? This apparently simple question raises fundamental questions about what is valuable and valued about higher education. Is it the prestige of the institution in which the course is located that tells you about its quality? Is it information about what is done on the course or what students who have studied the course say about it? Is it what students go on to do after they have graduated? Or is it something about the ways in which those students have been transformed by studying on the course that really tells us about its quality?

Within all these ways of thinking about the quality of courses are uncertainties about how much it is the process of studying a particular course at a particular institution that leads to high quality outcomes or whether it is the prestige of simply being associated with courses and institutions that we all 'know' are high quality. This reflects the tensions that are engendered by these questions in relation to the competing roles that the notion of quality needs to play. On one side measures of quality need to be portable and durable across contexts and time. We need ideas of quality that are not ever changing so that we can make meaningful comparisons. On the other side, notions of quality need to tell us something valid about how particular courses change the particular students who study them, which is by its nature an individual and unpredictable process. It is also dependent on the relations between the course and the students – students need to take full advantage of the opportunities that are offered and this is not something that can be guaranteed at the outset.

University league tables as measures of quality

Towards the portable and stable end of the pole, we have national university league tables that are generated by newspapers and websites. These travel across a number of contexts and audiences; having resonance for prospective students and their families, employers, policy makers, academics and universities, and international bodies. They tend to be fairly stable largely because they are based on measures which reflect historical reputation and financial advantage such as staff: student ratios, expenditure and entry standards. These different measures are brought together into a single score by algorithms and weightings that change year on year and lack any statistical credibility because they combine the scores on unrelated and incomparable measures.

The stability of league tables is also driven by the need to ensure that they appear credible to those who are reading them. People will only accept higher education league tables that match with their pre-conceived ideas of which are the top universities. In research into league tables, those who construct national university league tables cheerfully admitted this, arguing that this provided a safety check on the make-up and relative weightings of the measured used to construct particular league tables. It is easy to understand their thinking on this, if Oxbridge and London do not feature heavily near the top of your league table then readers are likely to suspect that there is something wrong with your league table because, after all, we all **know** which are the really top universities in the UK. We may be uncertain whether this is because of their history, their research, their teaching or the social mix of their students but we simply do know that they are the best, don't we? However, there is an obvious and dangerous circularity to this thinking. It is dangerous because it reinforces privilege: higher status institutions tend to take in a much greater proportion of privileged students and the measures that are used in league tables strongly and wrongly suggest that students who have been to these institutions have received a higher quality education and are likely to have developed greater knowledge and skills than students who have been to less high status universities.

In a project examining the quality of sociology and related undergraduate degrees, Monica McLean, Andrea Abbas and I found that the key elements of quality were the quality of the teaching and the quality of engagement with academic knowledge that the programmes supported. We examined four institutions whose programmes were very differently ranked in national league tables: Prestige and Selective were consistently in the top third of league tables for Sociology, whilst Community and Diversity were consistently in the bottom third. Based on an in-depth study of the quality of these courses which followed students through the three years of their degrees we found that league table position said nothing useful about the quality of the courses. We found strong evidence that the quality of the courses at Selective and Diversity seemed to be higher in terms of the quality of the teaching and the quality of students' engagement with academic knowledge than the courses at Prestige and Community. However, National League Table position did appear to have real impacts on students' perceptions on their own achievements. Whilst students at Prestige talked about their pride of attending a good university, some students at Diversity who were performing very well were dismissive of their achievements because they felt they were not at a good university. That the students had internalized these hierarchies as well as the way

they are used by employers to measure 'good graduates' show how notions of quality based on league tables serve to reinforce inequalities.

This means that overall national league tables as measures of quality have high portability and stability but weak validity meaning that they are both convincing and thoroughly misleading. For all of these reasons, league tables are very unlikely to support increases in the quality of undergraduate education. Our pre-conceived ideas of prestige and reputation serve to keep league tables too stable and most of the measures used will be unaffected by any efforts that institutions make to improve the quality of students' experiences. So from university's perspective, the best strategy in relation to such league tables is to find the one that they perform best in and seek to promote this as the most valid league table.

Student ratings as measures of quality
Another source of evidence about the quality of undergraduate courses is students' ratings of the quality of their educational experience. In the UK, this is currently provided by the National Student Survey (NSS) which is completed each year by final year undergraduate students. This is a measure that is a single factor in many UK higher education league tables. Despite criticisms of the survey for reducing education to the meaningless grunt of student satisfaction, research shows that student satisfaction with their courses tends to be related to their perceptions of the quality of their teaching which in turn is a reasonable predictor of the quality of their learning outcomes. This makes the outcomes of such surveys a more valid measure of the quality of an undergraduate education. Considering the outcomes of such surveys can also support improvements in the quality of undergraduate degree programmes. This involves using the survey as a starting point to explore students' experiences on these programmes more deeply, through conversations between programme teams and students, which are aimed at improving the educational experience offered.

The criticisms of the NSS show that it is slightly less portable than league tables. It is also less stable as institutions' positions tend to fluctuate more than they do in relation to national league tables. There are also problems with the ways that the outcomes of the NSS are used. The first is a problem that is shared more generally by national league tables. This is that institutions with very small differences in their national student survey scores can be separated by many places in rankings. This means that meaningless differences are presented as if they are large, significant and meaningful. Whilst one obvious solution would be to rank institutions in bands between which the differences actually mean something, this would involve sacrificing simplicity for the sake of validity and this is a sacrifice that no one has been willing to make.

The second problem is that, despite its potential for supporting improvements in quality, the NSS suffers from a version of Goodhart's Law that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. What happens in this case is that institutions spend vast amounts of time and energy trying to fix students' responses rather than trying to improve the quality of students' educational experience. The classic example of this is the response to students consistently giving lower scores to the quality of feedback they receive compared to the quality of teaching. This response has involved attempting to make students more aware of when they are having a 'feedback moment'. It is routinely

suggested at meetings to discuss NSS outcomes that when a tutor talks to a student about their work they should highlight that the student is actually getting feedback. This kind of nonsense will have no positive impact on the quality of students' educational experiences but is a predictable outcome of the logic of trying to fix the measures that are used to indicate quality.

A final problem is that, whilst by focusing on a single dimension of quality improves its validity; it also means that there are plenty of elements of quality that the NSS does not tell us about. So overall, the National Student Survey has greater validity in examining quality than league tables but this involves sacrificing some of the portability and stability of league tables as well of focusing on a narrower definition of what counts as high quality student experiences of higher education.

Student engagement with knowledge as a measure of quality
In my project with Monica McLean and Andrea Abbas that I outlined earlier, we argued that the ways in which students engage with academic knowledge should be at the centre of the way we think about the quality of an undergraduate education. Our argument was that in defining quality we need to focus on what is the central purpose of an undergraduate education. Our sense was that it is the critical relations that students develop to knowledge that is the defining feature of *higher* education. It is the ways that students' engagement with knowledge changes their sense of who they are and what the world is that marks the transformational elements of higher education.

This way of thinking about quality involves examining students' trajectories through their undergraduate education and exploring how they change through their engagement with knowledge as part of this process. As part of the project, we developed survey items that attempted to capture students' engagement with knowledge that appeared to be reasonable predictors of their learning outcomes. Whilst we would argue that this way of thinking about quality has strong validity because it focuses on the central purpose of an undergraduate education, it is much less portable and stable than league table notions of quality. This is because these relations to knowledge will be discipline-specific. The items that we used to capture students' relations to sociological knowledge would not be appropriate for students studying Chemistry. There also may be disciplinary differences in the extent to which these relations to knowledge have resonance internationally. Some disciplines, such as the natural sciences, engineering and economics, tend to have similar curricular internationally whereas other social science and humanities disciplines tend to be more nationally defined. For example, it is difficult to conceptualise what would be an international curriculum in Sociology or Literature studies.

Whilst this may be a heavy price to pay in terms of portability and stability, this way of thinking about quality also supports more thoughtful approaches to improving the quality of undergraduate education. This is because it focuses attention on developing environments and teaching that are focused on helping students to develop transformational relationships to knowledge. This is in marked contrast to the focus in recent government policy documents on improving quality through the creation of a competitive market for students-as-informed-consumers. The emphasis in these documents on assuring quality through competition for students is likely to encourage universities to focus on how their

undergraduate courses and reputation are perceived externally rather than focusing on improving the quality of the teaching and learning experiences that they offer students.

It is also problematic because this notion of improving quality is silent about what quality should be. Rather quality is defined in terms of ensuring high demand for courses rather than in terms of how those degree courses should transform students and their identities. A similar thing happens when quality is defined in terms of the employability of students. Rather than the quality of an education being valued for what students become, it is defined in terms of students having the correct dispositions for an ever-changing employment market. The problems with both of these approaches is that they are silent about the forms of knowledge that students should have access to and it is this knowledge that is central in the transformative power of higher education. It is also this knowledge that makes higher education, a higher form of learning.

Conclusion

Through considering these three ways of thinking about quality, I have tried to show a central tension in the work that notions of quality are required to do. It is important to be clear that both sides of this tension, portability and stability on the one side and validity on the other, are important. It would be wrong to be dismissive of the need for portability and stability because this is crucial in providing people with ways of understanding what quality is and making meaningful comparisons of the qualities of different programmes. There is no point in having rich and valid accounts of particular examples of quality if these do not allow a sense of the relative nature of this quality. However, there is equally no point in having highly comparable measures of qualities that are meaningless and tell us about prestige and history rather than about the quality of the education that students actually experience.

In conclusion, there are two important things to bear in mind when thinking about the quality of a university education. The first is that all measures of quality will simplify and give us a partial picture of what is going on. What is crucial is to seek to be clear what elements are being used to create this picture and to question what they actually say about the educational experience of students. Second, a central element of thinking about quality is the extent to which particular degree programmes give students access to knowledge that changes their understanding of the world and themselves. This may seem obvious but it is remarkable how little discussions of knowledge feature in policy documents relating to higher education. For example, in the 2011 White Paper 'Students at the Heart of the System', there was very little discussion of knowledge. Where it was discussed, it was either a junior partner in the couplet of 'skills and knowledge' or was not discussed in particularly positive terms, for example "A good student is not simply a consumer of other people's knowledge, but will actively draw on all the resources that a good university or college can offer to learn as much as they can" (paragraph 3.1, p33). This matters because prestige and reputation are such distorting factors in our ways of thinking about educational quality. Focusing on how knowledge changes students is essential if higher education is not simply going to reinforce existing social hierarchies.