Higher education and teaching quality: a conceptual map

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Abstract

This article describes briefly, current mechanisms for quality assurance and control in post-compulsory education in Britain, before providing a conceptual exploration of "teaching quality" in the context of Higher Education (HE). What do we mean by "quality" and by "teaching quality?" What is the difference between 'teaching quality' and 'quality assurance?' What is the relationship between 'academic standards' and 'teaching quality' in HE? Distinctions are made between intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of good teaching and between effective and educative teaching/learning interaction. Finally, in the context of good teaching in HE, four interrelated senses of 'academic standards' are also distinguished.

Key words

Higher Education; Teaching Quality; Quality Assurance; Academic Standards.

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Introduction

The quality of teaching in schools has always been considered an issue of importance, emphasised in teacher training, discussed by parents and monitored by school inspectors. In recent years, in several countries, the quality of teaching post-school has gained attention. In Britain, for example, the government has established a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) responsible for assessing how well British Universities assure the quality of their teaching across their discipline-based departments. Similar authoritative audits have also been taking place in the Colleges of Further Education. In what follows I will first outline, very briefly, how the QAA has set about the assurance of 'academic quality and standards in higher education' (HE) before turning to a more conceptual exploration. What do we mean by 'quality' and by 'teaching quality'? What is the difference between 'teaching quality' and 'quality assurance'? What is the relationship between 'academic standards' and 'teaching quality' in HE? I hope that a basic but useful conceptual mapping will emerge.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

The British Government has set up two separate Inspectorates for the quality assurance and control of post compulsory education, one for 16-19 year olds and one for adults. In Higher Education (HE) as I have mentioned, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) assesses academic standards. (QAA established a working group to advise the Agency on the procedures to be used for assessing the teaching quality of adult provision in HE).

QAA has produced extensive guidance in the form of a 'Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education.' This is comprehensive, covering such matters as general principles, the research environment, selection and admission of students, institutional policies and practices, dealing with complaints, monitoring and evaluating placement learning opportunities – and much more. QAA subject-review inspections, to assess the quality assurance mechanisms in individual university departments, has been a central QAA activity. The inspections are structured under six main headings:

- Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment
- Student Progression and Achievement
- Student Support and Guidelines
- Learning Resources
- Quality Management and Enhancement

In addition to these QAA visits to University Departments, the state has a number of mechanisms for checking standards in HE including institutional audit, the research assessment exercise and the development of the institute for Teaching and Learning which seeks to encourage high quality teaching in HE and to redress the perceived inbalance between the emphasis on research relative to much less emphasis, in the past, on teaching and teaching quality.

"Quality" and "Teaching Quality"

The "Quality" of X refers to the degree of excellence possessed by X, which may, of course, be of a high or a low level, signifying a good or a poor X. The characteristics (qualities) which are appropriate to X depend on the nature of X. A 'good orange', for example, will, in most 'normal' contexts, have a high level of juiciness, strong colour and sweetness. A 'good book' will be well written and interesting, and so on. 'Teaching quality', in the same way, refers to the degree of excellence possessed by the teaching in question.

We often assume, in talking about 'teaching quality', that we are referring to **good** teaching, but of course the degree of excellence may in fact be low.

Teaching must be assessed according to (measured against) the characteristics required by a worthwhile and successful teaching/learning interaction. In other words, 'good teaching' implies that successful learning has taken place. What, then, are the characteristics, a high level of which would constitute 'good teaching'? We should perhaps recognise that:

a) 'Good teaching' can refer to technically competent teaching. ie. Successful learning is achieved. But 'good teaching' can also refer to 'educative' teaching ie. **worthwhile** learning is successfully

achieved. (That which is learned is intrinsically worthwhile.) It follows from these two senses of good teaching that education rests on teaching which is characterised both by pedagogic competence **and** a worthwhile (educative) curriculum.

b) 'Good teaching' implies both universal and contextual characteristics. In other words, some characteristics will be required for any successful teaching/learning process to occur. eg. Any good teaching will require clear communication between teacher and taught. However, what counts as clear communication will involve some contextual considerations. Thus many characteristics will be influenced by context, requiring the teacher to match aims and pedagogy to the particular learners and their particular situation. A good early years teacher, for example, will have regard to the children's developmental level and to safety factors in the teaching environment. A teacher of an evening class for senior citizens may need to directly face the class when speaking, and to speak distinctly, having in mind the likely presence of people who are hard of hearing.

c) We could categorise the characteristics of good teaching as either intrinsic to the teaching/learning process or as extrinsic. If we take the six QAA headings, for example, the first three are aspects of the teaching/learning process – are intrinsic to the pedagogical interaction. What and how we teach, and the impact of that on our students' learning progress constitute – are part of – the pedagogic encounter. The second three, by contrast, are more about supporting those encounters through appropriate support structures, resources and monitoring – aspects important but extrinsic to the actual teaching/learning process.

'Teaching Quality' and 'Quality Assurance'

The QAA and similar inspectorates are assessing teaching quality assurance mechanisms, not teaching quality per se. But what correlation exists between teaching quality and the mechanisms by which we monitor that quality? (Certainly many educators who have been 'inspected' have believed both that the process has improved teaching quality, but not

nearly as much as direct attention to it would have done!) It is likely that having good quality assurance systems will tend to encourage improvement in teaching quality – monitoring is not unimportant. However, we need also to recognise that teaching quality is not the same as quality assurance and is not always **closely** correlated to it. Indeed, measuring teaching quality is not unproblematic since aspects of good teaching, as I argue below, are not always measurable.

Teaching quality is much more directly related to the characteristics intrinsic to the teaching/learning interaction than to the extrinsic ones and it is certainly possible to envisage excellent teaching which has not had the benefit of such extrinsic support.

The success of the teaching/learning process depends, in part, on the learner. A good teacher will be more likely to capture the learner's attention, to stimulate and engage their minds and imagination and so on, but the learner's motivation and personality etc ensure that the interaction is not under the teacher's complete control.

Most importantly of all, there is a sense in which the best teaching, being in some respects open-ended, is necessarily risky in its aims and approaches, and unpredictable in terms of learning outcome. The quality of such teaching is necessarily difficult to assess. The most imaginative, engaged, transformative, long-term learning is simply not measurable.

'Teaching Quality' and 'Academic Standards'

The QAA and similar bodies exist to assess 'academic quality and standards in higher education,' but the term 'academic standards' is rarely defined. It seems to be taken for granted that we know what it means. In fact as I have argued elsewhere (LEICESTER, 1993) it is a complex term which is used to refer to at least four distinct, if interrelated, ideas.

a) *Academic standards as academic skills.* Usually (good) 'academic standards' implicitly refers to a high level of second-order analytical skills. University students are not expected to produce purely descriptive work but to look at such descriptive data at one remove – to criticize, analyse and organise it. (Criticism involved detecting the flaws and strengths of one's own and others' arguments and theories. Analysis often involves conceptual clarification.

Organisation involves finding a fruitful categorisation of the first-order data to produce explanatory power and insight).

Such analytical skills involved understanding (and at a more advanced level, developing) theoretical frameworks. Analytical frameworks provide concepts and principles by which to interpret and explain first-order data and often draw, but are not founded, on the established academic disciplines. Their 'second-order' nature is characterised by generality of applicability and comprehensiveness of explanation. First-order data are provided by our shared commonsense world which we learn about at school (I do not deny that children can and do also begin to acquire more advanced, second-order skills at school).

b) *Academic standards as academic disciplines.* Good 'academic standards' also implicitly refers to mastery of an established academic discipline or disciplines. The university student is expected to acquire not just any knowledge but to develop an understanding of a particular form of knowledge. These academic disciplines – developed, disciplined, systematic forms of enquiry – involve propositional (knowing that) skill-based (knowing how) content. Postgraduate students and university staff are perhaps expected to contribute to the further development of their discipline.

c) *Academic standards as academic virtues.* Frequently, good 'academic standards' implicitly refers to exemplary adherence to the academic virtues. Or, to put this another way, it refers to a commitment to values inherent in the academic disciplines and skills. The university student is expected to come to understand these values; students and staff to practice these virtues. I refer to such things as:

- a) Valuing (and practicing) the pursuit of 'worthwhile' knowledge (PETERS, 1966). Much has been written on what knowledge is worthwhile. It is generally taken to be connected with the development of mind and thus to have intrinsic value and to widen the learner's cognitive perspective. Justification for its pursuit is given in terms of this intrinsic value and interest and not in terms of extrinsic usefulness or what is in one's interest.
- b) Valuing (and submitting to) the pursuit of understanding through systematic disciplined enquiry. This overlaps with, but is perhaps not identical to (a). The emphasis in (a) is on the virtue of contributing to

knowledge as a common possession and objective construct (POPPER, 1979). The emphasis here is on the virtue of taking responsibility for one's own continuing academic development.

- c) Valuing (and manifesting) integrity. Academic integrity takes many forms, eg. honesty in research findings, participation as a citizen of a community of scholars, acknowledgement of others' contributions, fair assessment of students' work.
- d) Valuing (and practicing) academic freedom, as in recognising the unacceptability of authority as a source of knowledge, or of censorship through fear; guarding the academic's right to research and publish without adverse consequences; maintaining the university's and the individual academic's autonomy, etc.
- e) *Academic standards as good pedagogy.* Here good 'academic standards' implicitly refers to the quality of the teaching and learning interaction. University students should not only achieve particular kinds and levels of learning, but make significant progress. Good teaching can make a crucial contribution to the kind and degree of progress. High academic standards in this context demand that the teaching is appropriate both to the learner and to what is being learned, so that satisfactory learning can take place. This implies that the learning will be satisfying to the student, and be integrated into his or her cognitive repertoire.

Clearly it is the last sense of 'academic standards' which is most closely associated with the notion of a high level of teaching quality. And as I have pointed out, effective pedagogy implies successful learning outcomes. In so far as the aims of the effective pedagogy relate to enabling students to develop their academic skills, to initiate them into the academic disciplines (which makes interdisciplinarity possible too) and to value the academic virtues, then to maintain 'academic standards' would indeed be equivalent to maintaining teaching quality in HE.

Conclusion

In considering 'teaching quality,' particularly in connection with HE (where since the early 1990's quality issues have become more prominent,

(DUKE, 1992) we have drawn some basic distinctions – the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of good teaching and that between an effective and an educative teaching/learning interaction. (Of course educative interactions need to be effective ones too!) We have recognised that teaching quality and quality assurance are distinct. Moreover, though it seems plausible, and certainly we act in this belief, that the two are correlated, this correlation is a loose one, not least because the best learning is not straightforwardly measurable and partly because even the most carefully planned teaching in Higher Education ought not to lead to totally predictable learning outcomes. Finally, we have seen that there are at least four interrelated senses of 'academic standards,' and that 'good teaching' in HE connects with all four.

All teachers, including all university teachers, ought to seek to produce teaching of a high standard. Those of us in 'adult education' (in particular) should be reflective practitioners (SCHÖN 1987) – seeking to understand the nature of good teaching in all its complexity and particularities, and practicing to improve.

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La educación Superior y la calidad de la Enseñanza: un mapa conceptual

Resumen

Este artículo describe los actuales mecanismos de garantía de la calidad y del control en la educación pos- compulsiva en Inglaterra, para después explorar conceptualmente el tema de la 'calidad de la enseñanza' en el contexto de la Educación Superior (ES). ¿Qué entendemos por 'calidad' y 'calidad de la enseñanza'? ¿Cuál es la diferencia entre 'calidad de la enseñanza' y la 'garantía de la calidad'? ¿Cuál es la relación entre los 'padrones académicos' y la 'calidad de la enseñanza' en la Educación Superior? Se realizan algunas distinciones entre las características intrínsecas y extrínsecas de la buena enseñanza de calidad y la interacción de una efectiva y educativa enseñanza / aprendizaje. Finalmente, en el contexto de la buena enseñanza en la Educación Superior, se distinguen cuatro sentidos interrelacionados de 'padrones académicos'.

Palabras - clave

Educación Superior, Calidad de la Enseñanza, Padrones Académicos, Garantía de la Calidad

Educação Superior e qualidade de ensino: um mapa conceitual

Resumo

O artigo descreve brevemente os atuais mecanismos de garantia de qualidade e controle na educação pós-compulsória na Grã-Bretanha e, em seguida, explora conceitualmente a questão da "qualidade do ensino" no contexto da Educação Superior (ES). O que entendemos por "qualidade" e por "qualidade de ensino"? Qual a diferença entre "qualidade de ensino" e "garantia de qualidade"? Qual a relação entre "padrões acadêmicos" e "qualidade de ensino" no ES? O artigo discute algumas características intrínsecas e extrinsicas do ensino de boa qualidade e entre uma efetiva e educativa interação entre ensinar/ aprender. Finalmente, no contexto da boa qualidade de ensino na ES, distinguimos quatro sentidos inter-relacionados de "padrões acadêmicos".

Palavras - chave

Educação Superior; Qualidade do Ensino; Padrões Acadêmicos; Garantia de Qualidade

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