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'Transforming the Learner' versus 'Passing the Exam' Understanding the Gap between Academic and Student Definitions of Quality (0008)

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Pressures to enhance the quality of university teaching have led to attention being paid to ways of recognizing and rewarding good teaching practice in England (DfES, 2003). This project investigates the positive teaching experience of Teaching Excellence Awards winners at a post-1992 university in England. It draws predominantly on Appreciative Inquiry interviews (Ludema et al., 2001) with university Awards winners and their students, exploring how they understand the notions of 'quality' and 'quality enhancement'. It reveals that quality as transformative learning has become a well accepted concept among academics, but students, while recognizing the concept, defined quality in more instrumental terms (eg passing examinations). They found it difficult to develop transformative learning. They tended to relate quality to academic teaching practice rather than their own learning experience.

'Transforming the Learner' versus 'Passing the Exam'

Understanding the Gap between Academic and Student Definitions of Quality

Introduction

Quality as a concept has migrated from the industrial and commercial settings of the 1980s into the domain of higher education (Newton, 2002). However, quality is a contested concept (Barnett, 1994). It is relative to stakeholders in the higher education sector (Harvey & Green, 1993). The stakeholders refer to individuals or groups who are regarded as having a legitimate interest in the quality of higher education, such as, funding bodies, students, staff and employers of graduates (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003).

The concepts of quality identified by Harvey and Green (1993) have greatly influenced people's perceptions of the meaning of academic quality since the early 1990s. They interpret quality as: exception; perfection; fitness for purpose; value for money; and transformation. Of these interpretations, 'fitness for purpose' and 'value for money' are perceived as the concepts adopted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (Barnett, 1992, 2003; Ottewill & Macfarlane, 2004). The original concept of transformative learning grew out of a confluence of post 60s radicalism, critical pedagogy theories (McLaren & Leonard, 1993; Shor, 1996; and Giroux, 2001) and a new interest in adult education as part of social welfare (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000). Based on this theory, students should not only engage with knowledge but also develop their capacity to understand and question existing ideas, assumptions and discourses that inform their experiences and common sense understandings of society (Herod, 2002).

There are some other ways to understand quality in the university sector, such as, quality as power (Morley, 2003), and quality as bureaucratisation, impression management and conformity (Newton, 2002). These interpretations provide valuable insights into how academics use quality as a pejorative term. However, these interpretations suggest that there is a lack of a shared definition of quality among academics.

Despite the complexity of the concept of quality, there is a move towards quality enhancement in the higher education sector in England. The QAA defines quality enhancement as 'the process of taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities' (QAA, 2006). The pressures to enhance the quality of university teaching have led to attention being paid to ways of recognizing and rewarding good teaching practice (DfES, 2003). There is research on the evaluation of teaching awards schemes across the UK (Skelton, 2004; Trowler, et. al, 2005; Warren & Plumb, 1999), but they are mainly confined to the awards scheme at the national level. Very few studies have focused on awards schemes within the institution, and few have examined the notion of quality and quality enhancement from the perspective of the award winners.

In order to cover this gap, this project adopts Appreciative Inquiry interviews (Ludema *et al.*, 2001) with fourteen university Teaching Excellence Awards winners and eight students undertaking Masters programmes at a post-1992 university. It explores how the teaching practice of award winners has benefited students' learning, and reveals how academics understand quality and quality enhancement of teaching and learning. These fourteen academics were drawn from five different schools/departments. They represented a range of seniority from senior lecturer to professor.

The research suggests that academics and students held different understandings of quality. Only one academic interviewee described 'quality' as a political term, used for management purposes and measured in terms of student scores, attrition rate and retention. Another three academics interpreted quality as meeting standards of either subject benchmarking statements or the National Student Survey. The remaining ten academic interviewees related quality to students' learning experience. They emphasised the learning benefits to students and ways to improve student learning, in order to develop and empower the student as a learner and as a person. This finding closely corresponds with one of the definitions of Harvey & Green (1993) that quality can be perceived as transformation of students.

However, most students who were interviewed doubted the feasibility of developing transformative learning, because passing examinations was their priority. Instead they defined quality as a knowledgeable tutor delivering a good teaching session. This suggests that students perceive quality as more relevant to academics' teaching practice, rather than to their learning experience. Students tended to judge teaching practice according to academics' knowledge of the subject area, the way academics organised the lectures, and the amount of hand-outs academics provided. The requirement for hand-outs to contain detailed information indicates students' dependence on academics and their focus on existing knowledge in their study, which explains why the notion of transformative learning was not widely accepted among students.

Students' perception of quality contrasts with the view of academic interviewees that good teaching practice and quality were different in that good teaching practice was a process of empowering

students' learning, while quality was perceived by students in more pragmatic terms as about a positive outcome (ie passing the examination). The different understandings suggest that while academics see quality as about the transformation of the learner and students define quality in terms of the performance of the teacher and their ability to help them pass exams.

Despite the concern that it was hard to set up standards for quality, ten academic interviewees expressed their wish to make quality relevant to the standards of either their professional body or that of their subject. There were five other perceived key factors affecting teaching quality: enthusiasm (of the teacher); an environment that is conducive to learning; student-centered teaching practice; relating teaching to research; and keeping teaching material updated.

The majority of academics and students defined quality enhancement as improvement, which is similar to the definition provided by the QAA. Academics explained the notion of improvement as meeting national standards and innovation in teaching. This included, for example, making teaching more interactive, diverse and accessible for students. Instead of putting emphasis on the quality of learning opportunity like the QAA suggests, academics argued for the importance of increasing the profile of teaching through the identification of good teaching practice and getting the right balance between teaching and research in the university. Both academics and students emphasized the importance of meeting students' needs and of adopting different teaching methods in the quality enhancement process. Student needs were interpreted as passing exams, making teaching relevant to what students needed to learn, and benefiting students' future careers.

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