

# Defining Quality in Higher Education in a Global Context

James Williams,  
Social Research & Evaluation Unit

[james.williams@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:james.williams@bcu.ac.uk)  
<http://www0.bcu.ac.uk/crq/jameswilliams.htm>

# Introduction

- What do we mean by ‘quality’ in HE?
- How does this affect our notion of higher education?
- How does the ‘global context’ affect our notions of quality in HE?
- How do we respond?

# 1. What is 'Quality' in HE?

‘Quality is neither mind nor matter, but a third entity independent of the two....even though Quality cannot be defined, you know what it is.’

(Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*  
1974)

‘What the hell is “quality” in higher education?’  
(Ball, 1985)

Quality is ‘elusive’ (Neave, 1986)

Quality is ‘a creature of political fashion’ (Becher,  
1989)

‘It is so hard to define quality in HE that we should give up bothering.’ (Vroeijenstijn, 1991)

‘No authoritative definition of quality in higher education is possible.’ (Scott, 1994)

# What is 'Quality'?

- 'The Quality' - Elite in society
- Neutral term: Good vs. Bad quality – spectrum - 'Top quality' - the best of consumables
- Quality (control) – ensuring a product meets expectations/standards
- 'The quality of...' - An attribute
- Ideal type? Archetype'? Plato?

# Harvey & Green, 1993



BIRMINGHAM CITY  
University

Quality in HE:

- different things to different people.
- relative to 'processes' or 'outcomes'.

Five discrete but interrelated categories:

- exceptional
- perfection
- fitness for purpose
- value for money
- transformative



# Quality as Exceptional

- Traditional view of quality? Or Quality as ‘Excellence’?
- Exceeding high standards
- Quality assurance - checking standards
- Danger of appearing elitist – how can you also be inclusive? A class element? A Bourdieuan conundrum?

# Quality as Perfection

- Perfection or consistency
- 'Zero defects' or 'Getting things right the first time' – embodies philosophy of prevention rather than inspection
- Notion of quality culture – everyone involved in maintaining standards; a democratic quality process?

# Quality as Fitness for Purpose

- Focus on purpose – development of learning outcomes?
- Customer specification (customer is sovereign?)
- Customer requirements
- Mission of institution
- Quality assurance – ensuring the processes are there to ensure that desired quality is delivered

# Quality as Value for money

- Populist view of quality – value
- Accountability is at heart of this view of quality
- Can we really put a price on (higher) education?
- Efficiency and performance indicators
- Led to customer charters – outlining what customers can expect
- League tables – pseudo market encouraging competition between institutions

# Quality as Transformation

- Qualitative change: a fundamental change in form
- Transformation relating to mind and development
- Education not a service for a customer but an ongoing transformation of a participant
- Enhancing the participant
- Value added or learning gain?
- Empowering the participant
- ‘Moral obligation to disturb students intellectually’

‘In the last resort, quality is a philosophical concept’  
(Green, 1994)

## 2. Quality and the Global Context

*'quality has political dimensions...'*  
(Harvey & Williams, 2010)



‘researchers and practitioners alike should stop treating policy instruments as context-free and politically neutral’ (Kahoutek, 2014)

# Political quality?

- Quality assurance in HE – roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century: about control
- 1980s – politics, managerialism and accountability: a battle between govt and HE
- 1990s – new universities, massification, competition and increasing costs
- Bologna process; ESG; revised ESG
- Students and fees: consumerist view of HE
- International competition – ranking game?

# Consumerisation of HE

- Students paying tuition fees
- Student satisfaction surveys popular
- Student expectations vs. Staff expectations
- TNHE
- Accreditation mills
- ‘Value for money’ dimension of quality dominant?

# Competition in HE

- Competition between HEIs
- Competition internationally
- Desperately seeking international students
- Alternative providers
- Rankings – a proxy for quality?
- ‘Exceptional’ dimension of quality now dominant?

# Ethics and Quality

- Growing concern with corruption
- Growing concern with 'academic ethics'
- Teaching ethics
- Developing the ethical citizen?

# 3. How do we respond?

# Develop an Effective QA System? (Newton, 2006)

- clearly specifies roles, responsibilities and procedures
- enables institutional aims and objectives to be achieved
- informs decision making
- is free from individual bias
- is repeatable over time
- involves all staff
- includes the specification of standards and acceptable evidence
- prompts continuous improvement

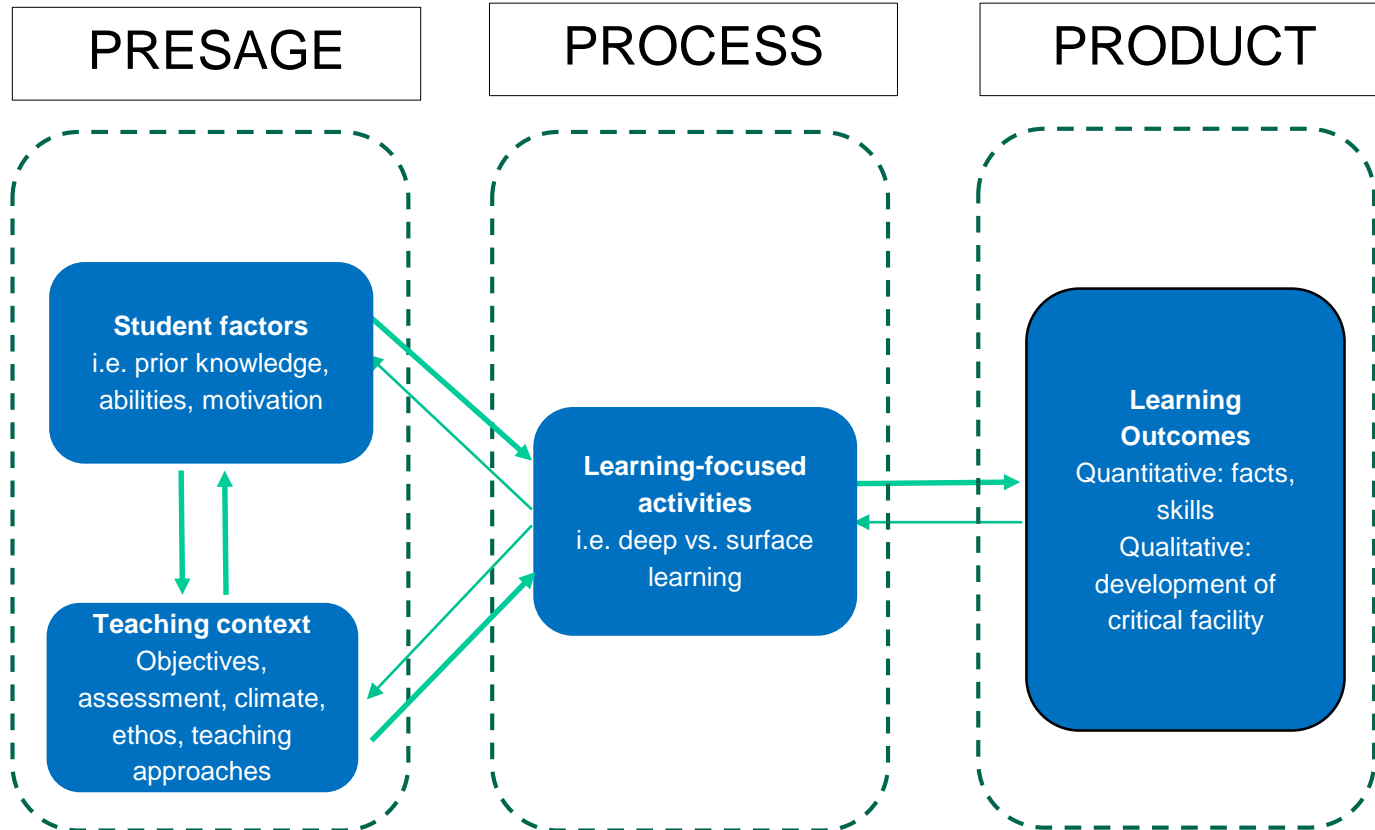
# Quality as Enhancement?

- A definition of quality?
- An imperative for action – improvement
- Identify what needs improvement then ensure improvement occurs
- Cycle of improvement?
- Link between QA and QE? A spectrum



*If we are to encourage the development of quality learning outcomes in our students, such as deep learning, understanding, independent learning, critical and creative thinking, problem solving and other lifelong learning attributes, we may need to create contexts that discourage surface, and encourage deep approaches to learning. (Tam, 1999)*

# Biggs' 3P model 2003



# Stakeholder engagement

- Addressing the needs of various stakeholders or just pandering to them?
- Who are the stakeholders in HE?
- What languages do they speak?
- Is there a 'key' stakeholder?
- How do we engage stakeholders?

# Student engagement

- Effective student feedback processes (appropriate, relevant, used)
- Students on Committees
- Student Academic Partnerships
- Students involved in curriculum development?
- Embedded into curriculum and outcomes?
- Embed ethics teaching

# Staff engagement

- Research assessment
- Teaching assessment
- Effective staff feedback processes (appropriate, relevant, used)
- Staff expertise recognised and used in the institution?
- Ethical practice
- Partnerships?

# Employer engagement

- Universities producing ‘employable’ graduates?
- Professional bodies involved in accreditation
- SMEs – awareness of value of graduates
- Guest speakers from the ‘industry’?
- Industry visits?
- Partnerships?

# Conclusion

- Quality – remains hard to define but more explicit
- Quality – various overlapping dimensions
- Philosophical standpoints
- Quality – means different things to different people
- Quality – focus on learning and teaching – the ‘student experience’
- Relationship between quality and ethics
- Identify ‘stakeholders’ in HE and their reasonable needs
- Productive partnerships?

# Defining Quality in Higher Education?

James Williams,  
Social Research & Evaluation Unit

[james.williams@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:james.williams@bcu.ac.uk)  
<http://www0.bcu.ac.uk/crq/jameswilliams.htm>