



THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Assist. Prof. Dr. Türkan Aksu
Akdeniz University
Antalya- Turkey
turkanaksu@akdeniz.edu.tr

Abstract

Quality is a major concern to everyone interested in higher education. Quality has become a bigger interest as the demand for higher education has increased and the expectations of government and society have diversified. Measuring quality has been an ongoing effort as it is inevitable to address the expectations of people both inside and outside of higher education. Defining and measuring the quality of higher education programs is thought to be difficult for number of reasons, such as what quality exactly means according to everyone or what methods are appropriate to use for measurement. Therefore, this study aims to present a sketchy look at the history of higher education, including its long-standing concern with quality.

This study aims to present a sketchy look at the history of higher education, including its long-standing concern with quality. Various scholars' perspectives will be discussed to elaborate the concept of quality. Additionally, five views of program quality identified in the higher education literature will be discussed along with the different views and shortcomings as to what really makes high quality academic programs.

This paper presents the literature review of a previous study and therefore is limited to resources obtained at the time. All the materials discussed in the literature have been collected by the researcher in hard copy format at libraries located at a State University campus in the United States.

The literature has serious shortcomings on the views of quality of academic programs. The discussion focuses either on quantitative or qualitative evaluation of higher education programs. Most studies are empiric in nature and fail to introduce a comprehensive theory the higher education program quality discussions need at all degree level academic programs. Since the concept of quality has multidimensional attributes, an integrated approach to measure quality that embraces both quantitative and qualitative indicators mentioned in the literature is necessary.

Keywords: Higher education, quality, views of quality, program quality indicators

INTRODUCTION

Quality in higher education institutions has always been of major interest to everyone. Indeed, higher education has become the most popular means to improve the quality of and foster developments in the lives of individuals and social institutions. Colleges and universities, Ashworth (1979) states, have been given credit in achieving social accomplishments that benefit public good. For example, the expansion of scientific knowledge and technological advancement in the American industrial system has been attributed to higher education. He goes on to say that colleges and universities have also benefited individuals tremendously through personal fulfillment and the enrichment of tastes, appreciation, and understanding. Ashworth (1979) also states that while higher education has been literally worshipped for years, little attention has been given to such details as institutions' inner processes, program offerings, and the past and future of the institutions. The university community, he goes on to say, probably spends less time studying itself than it does almost any other topic.



As in several periods of the past, widespread interest in the quality of higher education programs is extremely high at the present time (Haworth & Conrad, 1997). This interest derives from several sources, as Haworth and Conrad (1997) point out: public's perceptions that (1) many academic programs are falling behind the demands of today's educational requirements and the future's workforce; (2) high-quality programs need to be maintained despite rising costs, which requires ongoing quality control and program review; (3) financial support is declining which in turn requires administrators to focus on programs that are crucial and must be funded; and (4) universities are making efforts to achieve quality programs at the undergraduate and graduate level.

The following section first presents a brief look at the higher education history with various scholars' perspectives on the concept of quality. Their efforts to define quality, to develop different indices to measure quality, and to improve the quality of higher education institutions bring us face-to-face with a rich and diverse literature. This paper discusses only a few of those views. The third part discusses the five views of program quality that have been identified by Haworth and Conrad (1997) based on their intensive literature review of the topic.

DISCUSSION

Two different views were put forward on the establishment of American colleges and universities. According to Brubacher & Rudy (1968, as cited in Kowalski & Cangemi, 1982: 11), the roots of higher education institutions in the United States date back to 1636 with the foundation of Harvard College. They state that some of the graduates of Cambridge and Oxford Universities, with a vast interest in conserving and transmitting their "ancestors' cherished culture", were influential in the establishment of the first higher educational institutions in America. Chamberlain and Shilling (1967), however, suggest that the early concepts taught in American colleges can be attributed to the influence of ancient Greeks; the works of Greek philosophers had influenced concepts, such as liberal education, which served members of the upper class (as cited in Kowalski & Cangemi, 1982: 11). According to Rudolph (1962), religious principles, namely the church as the key institution, were at the core of the colonial colleges at the time they were founded. Educated clergy and public had a significant impact on the development of higher education in the United States (as cited in Kowalski & Cangemi, 1982 : 12). Educating civic leaders and preparing a learned clergy was the dual academic purpose carried out by Harvard. The eight other colleges founded prior to the American Revolution shared the same goals. Among these colleges were William and Mary, 1693; Yale, 1701; Dartmouth, 1769; College of Philadelphia (later renamed University of Pennsylvania), 1740; and the College of New Jersey (later renamed Princeton College), 1746. The American Revolution, though, brought some changes in purpose, curriculum, financing, and enrollment of the traditional colleges.

Long-standing Concern with Quality

In the higher education community, the most precious asset is public confidence. If that confidence is to be kept alive, quality must be maintained in the academic and other missions, otherwise the public will, rightfully, withhold its support. The challenge to realize the highest possible standards is never ending, and it is also what makes an academic career worthwhile (Peltason, foreword in Stauffer, 1981: ix).

Quality in American higher education is a continuing concern for both educators and the public. As Stauffer (1981: 1) puts it, Governor Thomas Jefferson's efforts at improving the quality of American colleges more than 200 years ago "along new Revolutionary lines" is an example of one of the early actions. His actions brought new ways for designing and improving higher education in the United States. Quality has become a bigger concern as the demand for higher education has increased and the expectations of government and society have diversified. Inevitable questions about the decline of



quality have been raised by people both in the educational arena and, increasingly, outside higher education (Ashworth, 1979).

There are number of reasons why the quality of education has deteriorated in many colleges and universities. An important role of colleges--sorting, screening, classifying, training, and ranking students during their education and testing their performances upon graduation--has been relinquished. The widespread concern employers have for the college graduates relates to the fact that many new degree recipients are poorly prepared and that many of them perform poorly on state and national tests and licensure examinations (Ashworth, 1979). Although some preventive actions in the right direction have been taken for our colleges, Ashworth (1979) believes that some events that might weaken the quality of higher education may be overlooked.

The Concept of Quality?

Kuh (1981) identified different themes that have prevailed in policies and practices of higher education institutions in the second half of the 20th century: "Excellence in the early 1960s, access in the late 1960s, and egalitarianism in the 1970:1 . . . challenged administrators and faculty alike. One of the salient themes of the 1980s was the promise to be high-quality".

Defining and measuring the quality of student experience has been an ongoing effort. Because quality is a relative term, two immediate problems present themselves: what is perceived to be of "high quality" differs from one individual to another and from one institution to another; and the lack of a clearly defined concept of quality makes it difficult to quantify. The definition of quality varies depending on the standards and needs of the individual and the situation (Kuh, 1981). Moreover, Fife (foreword in Kuh, 1981) points out two factors that contribute to the difficulty in precisely measuring quality: a lack of agreement on a definition of what quality is, and differences in quality between inputs and outputs of an institution. Fife (1981) explains, "an institution may appear to have only average parts (faculty, students, academic environment, etc.) but, the end product (research, academic and career achievements) may be considered of high quality . . . or conversely" (foreword in Kuh, 1981).

What Changes Affect Quality?

Given all the efforts to define, rank or rate the quality of academic programs, a question emerges: "Why should quality or excellence be a concern?" Higher education has been going through a period that presents some challenges as to the value of education it offers. Several new developments have had a substantial impact on the system of higher education in America. Changing demographics in the college population is one factor. For example, the age range of people attending colleges and universities is steadily increasing. It is common to find people of retirement age, people in their middle years and people as young as 15 (Solmon, 1981; Kowalski & Cangemi, 1982). Solmon (1981) discusses other factors of change: one issue relates to the constantly changing economy of the country; another issue points out that the value of a college education has inevitably diminished because of the high number of people now with a college degree. Kuh (1981) pointed out additional problems: students with more diverse learning abilities and educational goals now represent a high proportion of college and university students, and a deteriorating economy has affected the amount of financial support from federal and state agencies. All these changes and many other difficulties in the higher education industry (which are beyond the scope of this paper) have raised students' concerns about whether to go to college and where to go. The college degree itself and the grades earned are now less valid indicators of the candidate's preparation for the labor market, which, in turn, raises questions about the quality of higher education programs (Stauffer, 1981).

In response to all these problems, it is vital for higher education institutions to approach the quality issue seriously, particularly at the undergraduate level. This concern initiated the identification of



appropriate indices of quality measurement which have become of paramount interest to many (Kuh, 1981). To summarize, with predictions of enrollment declines, a changing college-age population, and increased financial pressure, quality has taken on even greater significance for every institution, even for those institutions ranked highly. This means it is now crucial that every institution develop a more sophisticated understanding of what quality connotes and how it can be measured (Lawrence & Green, 1980).

Different approaches to defining and determining quality indicators

Most approaches to assessing quality in the undergraduate experience have been quantitative in nature, using scores on entrance examinations (student ability), faculty salaries, library holdings, and the like. Qualitative approaches represent alternative ways of assessing quality—approaches that extensively use inquiry methods common to case studies such as interviews and observations.

Bergquist and Armstrong (1986) discussed three ways that the program quality in higher education has been assessed. The first and most common strategy is to look at quality in terms of "quantitative 'input' indicators"; this strategy involves addressing questions such as: "How many faculty members have doctorates?"; "How many volumes are there in the library?"; "How many research projects and publications have been produced?"; "How many minority students were admitted?". While these indicators are useful in providing us a profile or outline of an institution with its scope, capabilities, and resources, they tell us little about the institution in terms of either the "output" of the college or university or what actually occurs within the institution with regard to the process of education.

Bergquist and Armstrong (1986) also discuss the output-oriented measures of quality. These measures either focus on student competencies and achievements before they graduate from college or university, such as critical thinking and scores on the Graduate Record Examination, or on their level of success when they start a career after graduation—such as rate of admission to graduate school, average level of income five years after graduation, and percentage of graduates who are listed in *Who's Who in America*. Measures of output tell us, to some degree, about the status of a college or university and even help new students when making a choice for their college or university education. However, these measures alone provide very little useful information regarding the quality of the programs being offered by the college or university since they do not help us understand if the outcomes are directly linked to students' experiences in colleges.

Finally, Bergquist and Armstrong (1986) present "value-added" definitions of quality. The quality of an educational program can be adequately assessed only if one can determine the extent to which the program has directly contributed to the desired outcome. To the extent that a college or university has added value to the student—in terms of desired characteristics, desired skills, or desired life or career outcomes—and to the extent that a college or university can specify the way(s) in which it has contributed this value, it can be described as offering educational quality. Their conclusion is similar to that of Haworth and Conrad (1997) in the way they, too, suggest a comprehensive model to study program quality in higher education. But Haworth and Conrad (1997) define the quality of an educational program by three dimensions: input, output, and students' experience.

Another dimension of quality, accreditation, has been mentioned in the literature as a manifestation of institutional quality or excellence (Solmon, 1981; Lawrence & Green, 1980). Accrediting criteria demand that institutional or program goals are clear and that the institution or program has reached these goals. Professional associations and regional accrediting groups periodically conduct reviews of the institutions or programs for accreditation. Accredited institutions and programs are considered to be higher quality than those non-accredited. In general, the accreditation evaluation resembles the quantitative indicators as it tends to rate quality according to resources available, but neglects to study the relationship between resources and goal achievement. Accreditation standards, Solmon



(1981) discusses, are also criticized for not clearly defining the attributes of quality, and what the relationship between accreditation and quality is.

Assessment of institutional or program quality also finds expression in reputational studies. Solmon (1981) says we are interested in knowing which are the best colleges, the best graduate programs in economics, and the like. The quality ratings of programs in higher education, however Solmon (1981) says, are believed to be biased by institutional size and age, and to be subjective in the sense that they reward large research institutions and ignore the needs for diversity, innovation, and nontraditional models.

Another indicator of institutional or departmental quality suggests an aggregate measure comparing each educational unit's worth to all units in the country, no matter how diverse their goals are. Two methods are used to evaluate the programs in this category: ratings of experts and accumulations of objective (measurable) data on characteristics of institutions or departments, such as students, faculty, and resources. Both methods are thought to be subjective assessments of what the dimensions of quality are or should be (Stauffer, 1981).

Five Views of Program Quality

Higher education literature includes discussions of mostly empirical studies on program quality. Scholars have looked at program quality in studies of the quantitative attributes of quality and quality rankings of academic programs (Haworth & Conrad, 1997). The former identify both "objective attributes" of quality programs and attributes that are used in "reputational rankings" of graduate programs. The latter similarly use reputation rankings and objective indicators to rank academic programs. Haworth and Conrad (1997) discussed five different views of program quality: faculty, resources, student quality-and-effort, curriculum requirements, and multi-dimensional/multi-level. Drawing heavily on Haworth and Conrad (1997), below is a brief discussion of each of the five views.

Faculty View

Higher education program quality literature heavily relies on the faculty view. Researchers studying this view focused on faculty who are dedicated to creating and distributing knowledge (Blackburn & Lingenfelter, 1973; Conrad & Blackburn, 1986; Fairweather & Brown, 1991; King & Wolfe, 1987). Haworth and Conrad (1997) summarize four quality attributes associated with this view: number of faculty with doctoral degrees; faculty accomplishments in scholarship and research; faculty's ability to obtain research funding; and number of awards and honors faculty are granted. The quantitative attributes studies in the literature support the view that faculty characteristics and program quality are highly related (Haworth & Conrad, 1997).

Resources View

Another widely accepted attribute of a quality program is adequate resources; this view asserts that adequate resources are at the center of a high quality program. The resources view focuses on three attributes: a substantial number of faculty and students (human resources); a large volume of financial resources; and excellent physical facilities (Haworth & Conrad, 1997).

The resources view is supported by a substantial body of research in the literature on objective indicator rankings and quantitative attributes of quality programs. For instance, researchers have found a direct relationship between the quality of the program and its size (Abbott, 1972; Conrad & Blackburn, 1986; Fairweather & Brown, 1991; Oromaner, 1970).

Student Quality-and-Effort View

The student quality-and-effort view is forwarded on the grounds that student quality, effort, and involvement actually form the core of high-quality programs. Haworth and Conrad (1997) identified



the following attributes across the literature about this view: students of high-quality programs come to school with high academic achievements; they are eager to participate in co-curricular activities; and they devote substantial time and effort to their education.

Again, student quality is an important component of both quantitative attributes and objective indicator rankings of the quality. Some of these studies discuss the relationship between, for example, student selection criteria and program quality (Astin & Solmon, 1981; Conrad & Blackburn, 1985a; Hagstrom, 1971); others focus on the relationships between entering graduate students' and freshmen's scores on standardized tests and the quality of the program (Astin & Solmon, 1979). Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Astin (1977, 1993) reported a direct relationship between the level of students' involvement in their learning experiences and a program's quality.

Curriculum Requirements View

According to Haworth and Conrad (1997), the curriculum requirements view is the oldest view of program quality and it advances the idea that a coherent and rigorous curriculum produces a high-quality program. It stresses three attributes centered around the curriculum of a program: a mix of core and specialized courses, residency requirements focusing on experiences outside the department, and the completion of work such as a thesis or projects.

This view finds some support in the literature. For example, the Council of Graduate Schools (1981) reports that a quality master's program should emphasize a series of coherent courses, including seminars and discussions, comprehensive exams and a tangible product such as a thesis or project.

Multi-dimensional/Multi-level View

This is a comprehensive view of program quality which suggests that all the views discussed earlier should be considered as integral parts of a quality program (Blackburn & Lingenfelter, 1973; Clark, 1976; Conrad & Blackburn, 1985b; Fairweather & Brown, 1991; Jones, Lindzey, and Coggeshall, 1982; Kuh, 1981; Solmon & Astin, 1981).

Studies on quantitative attributes and quality assessment that identify attributes of program quality support this view. For example, Conrad and Blackburn (1985a, 1986) describe 32 attributes—all of which refer to one of the five views of program quality. The Council of Graduate Schools (1981) supported this view through its cooperative work with the Educational Testing Service in advancing multi-dimensional/ multi-level quality programs.

CONCLUSION

The literature on higher education program quality has several important limitations. Haworth & Conrad (1997) describe the following. First, each approach focuses on only one aspect of an academic program rather than multiple aspects. Another limitation is that the effects of those important aspects on students have been ignored. Also, past research has relied heavily on the reputational rankings and quantitative attributes of high-quality programs.

These studies have been found to have serious limitations. For example, no frame of theory has been developed that explains quality in terms of higher education programs. Moreover, the five views discussed above fail to look at how program quality attributes relate to student outcomes. Even more, past studies mostly focused on either baccalaureate or doctoral programs. They regard master's programs as a part of doctoral programs and fail to focus on master's programs themselves.

Although the quality concept has received its fair share of attention in the literature, the discussions, most of the time, failed to pinpoint what connotes quality in higher education programs. The



discussion boils down to one thing as expressed by Kuh (1981: 1): "Because quality is a multidimensional property, an eclectic or holistic perspective on estimating quality that encompasses elements of both quantitative and qualitative approaches was considered valuable in analyzing various indices of quality previously reported in the literature".

WJEIS's Note 1: This paper is produced from a Dissertation Thesis by Turkan Mustan (1998). "Operationalization and Preliminary Testing of the Engagement Theory. University of Wisconsin-Madison, WI, USA.

WJEIS's Note 2: This article was presented at 6th World Congress on Educational and Instructional Studies- WCEIS 2017, 26-28 October 2017, Antalya-Turkey and was selected for publication for Volume 7 Number 4 of WJEIS 2017 by WCEIS Scientific Committee.

REFERENCES

Abbott, W. F. (1972). University and departmental determinants of the prestige of sociology departments. *American Sociologist*. 7.14-15.

Ashworth, K. H. (1979). *American Higher Education in Decline*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press.

Astin, A. W. (1977). *Four critical years: Effects of college on beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Astin, A. W., & Solmon, L. C. (1979). Measuring academic quality: An interim report. *Change*. 11.48-51.

Astin, A. W., & Solmon, L. C. (1981). Are reputational ratings needed to measure quality? *Change*. 13.14-19.

Bergquist, W. H., & Armstrong, J. L. (1986). *Planning effectively for educational quality*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Blackburn, R. T., & Lingenfelter, P. E. (1973). *Assessing quality for doctoral programs: Criteria and correlates of excellence*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for the Study of Higher Education.

Clark, M. J. (1976). The meaning of quality in graduate and Professional education. In J. Katz & R. T. Hartnett (Eds.), *Scholars in the making: The development of professional students*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.

Conrad, C. F., & Blackburn, R. T. (1985a). Correlates of departmental quality in regional colleges and universities. *American Educational Research Journal*. 22 .279-295.

Conrad, C. F., & Blackburn, R. T. (1985b). Research on program quality: A review and critique of the literature. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research: Vol. 1*. New York: Agathon.

Conrad, C. F., & Blackburn, R. T. (1986). Current views of departmental quality: An empirical examination. *Review of Higher Education*. 9 .249-265.



Council of Graduate Schools in the United States. (1981). *The master's degree: A policy statement*. Washington, DC: Author.

Fairweather, J. S., & Brown, D. F. (1991). Dimensions of academic program quality. *Review of Higher Education*. 14.155-176.

Fife, J. D. (1981). Foreword. In G. D. Kuh, *Indices of Quality in the Undergraduate Experience* (n. pag.). (AAHE- ERIC Higher Education Research Rep. No. 4). Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.

Hagstrom, W. O. (1971). Inputs, outputs, and the prestige of university science departments. *Sociology of Education*. 44. 375-397.

Haworth, J. G., & Conrad, C. F. (1997). *Emblems of quality in higher education: Developing and sustaining high- quality programs*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Jones, L. V., Lindzey, G., & Coggeshall, P. E. (1982). *An assessment of research-doctorate program s in the United States: Vol. 5*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

King, S., & Wolfe, L. (1987). A latent-variable causal model of faculty reputational ratings. *Research in Higher Education*. 27.99-106.

Kowalski, C. J., & Cangemi, J. P (1982). *Higher education in the United States: Its development and impact*. In J.

P. Cangemi, & C. J. Kowalski (Eds.), *Higher Education in the United States and Latin America* (pp. 11-13). New York: Philosophical Library.

Kuh, G. D. (1981). *Indices of quality in the undergraduate experience*. (Report No. AAHE-ERIC/ RR-92-4) Washington D.C.: American Association for Higher Education.

Lawrence, J. K., & Green, K. C. (1980). *Question of quality: The higher education rating game*. Washington, D.C.: ASHE

Oromaner, M. J. (1970). A note on analytical properties and prestige of sociology departments. *American Sociologist*. 5. 240-244.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Solmon, L. C. (1981). A multidimensional approach to quality. In T. M. Stauffer (Ed.), *Higher education's principal challenge* (pp. 7-10). Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

Solmon, L. C., & Astin, A. W. (1981). Departments without distinguished graduate programs. *Change*. 13.23-28.

Stauffer, M. T. (1981). *Quality in American higher education*. In T. M. Stauffer (Ed.), *Higher education's principal challenge* (pp. 1-6). Washington, DC: American Council on Education.