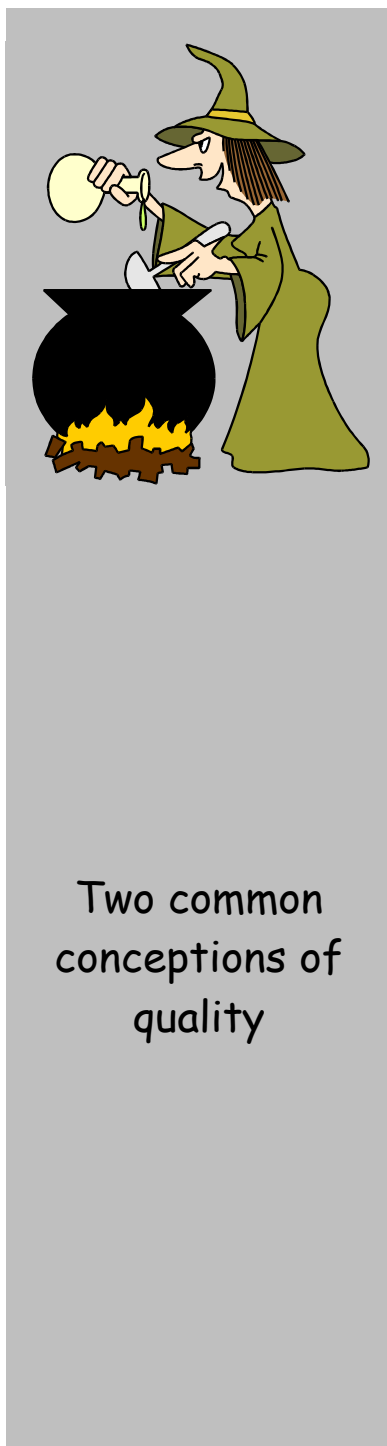


From the Editor:

'Learning Matters at Lingnan' are short papers that aim to promote a dialogue on teaching and learning. I encourage all staff to consider this as a vehicle for sharing thoughts on educational issues as they might affect us at the University. If you feel you have something which might be appropriate for inclusion in an issue of this publication, then please forward it to the TLC. I would be delighted if staff (and not only academic staff) from outside the Teaching and Learning Centre were to be prominent or even occasional contributors.



Quality as Value-Added

What counts as quality in higher education is contested. Quality is a multi-faceted notion which is relative and value-laden in nature. Each stakeholder in higher education sees quality and its outcomes differently resulting in a host of methods and approaches adopted to measure quality in the light that one sees it.

For example, to the committed scholar the quality of higher education is its ability to produce a steady flow of people with high intelligence and commitment to learning that will continue the process of transmission and advancement of knowledge.

To the government a high quality system is one that produces trained scientists, engineers, sociologists, economists, doctors and so on in numbers judged to be required by society.

To an industrialist a high quality educational institution may be one that turns out graduates with wide-ranging, flexible minds, readily able to acquire skills, and adapt to new methods and needs.

Each of these views represents a valid expectation of higher education and about its quality. Because of its highly contested nature, there are widely differing conceptualizations of quality in use. But the two most commonly used approaches to conceiving 'quality' or 'excellence' in higher education are the reputational and resource approaches (Astin, 1985).

The reputational view holds that excellence is equated with an institution's rank in the prestige pecking order of the institution as revealed, for example, in periodic surveys and people's subjective preferences for a particular institution over the others. The resource approach holds that excellence is equated with such criteria as the examination scores of entering students, the endowment, the physical plant, the scholarly productivity of the faculty, and so on.

Quality as 'Change'

Perhaps the major limitation of these two approaches is that they do not necessarily reflect higher education's most fundamental purpose — the education of students. If one accepts the idea that higher education's principal reason for being is to maximise the intellectual and personal development of its students, then 'quality' or 'excellence' should reflect the 'value-added' in students rather than mere reputation or resources.

The higher education experience can profoundly affect a student in many ways. Higher education does not just enhance students' intellectual capacity, but also can literally transform self-image, equip the individual with more skills, build on the basis of the knowledge that the individual had before arrival; change attitudes and assumptions. It is the 'change' in students as a result of university attendance that is central to the notion of quality in higher education.

The basic argument underlying the value-added approach is that true quality resides in the institution's ability to affect its students favourably, to make a positive difference in their intellectual and personal development. Hence, the most excellent institutions are those that have the greatest impact on the student's knowledge and personal development.

'..... a high quality institution that knows what is happening to its students has a system of measurement and feedback on student development that enables it to make appropriate adjustments in programs or policies when the need for change or improvement is indicated. In other words, quality is equated not with prestige or physical facilities but rather with a continuing process of critical self-examination that focusses on the institution's contribution to the student's intellectual and personal development'.

(Astin, 1982: 15)

The discussions so far on quality in higher education are premised on two important considerations: that the central activity of higher education is that of maximising the student's educational development; and that it is the continuing improvement to maximise student learning and development that remains the primary goal of universities and should be the focus of any concern over quality in higher education.

Maureen Tam

References:

- Astin, A.W. (1982) Why not try some new ways of measuring quality? *Educational Record*, Spring 1982, pp.10-15.
- Astin, A.W. (1985) *Achieving Educational Excellence*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

