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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.



Continuing the Dialogue on 'Quality'

In the previous issue we discussed the various conceptualisations of quality which are relative to the stakeholders in higher education. Underpinning the diverse and very often conflicting views of quality is the challenge for us to find ways of developing and measuring quality outcomes that adequately reflect the fullness of university education and its impact on students' academic, social and personal growth.

Since the last four issues on 'quality', it has been encouraging to have colleagues contribute their thoughts and share with us their notions of quality. Here I want to continue with this theme with a 'Letter to the Editor' from Mr Terence Pang who interrogated the use of words like 'quality' and 'value' in higher education.

**'Letter to
the Editor'
from
Mr Terence Pang**

Dear Editor,

While I agree that what counts as quality is contestable and depends on who the stakeholder is (Tam, M. *Learning Matters at Lingnan*, 20 March 2000), I do query the recent overuse of the term 'quality' in educational circles. Take the title of the Chief Executive Tung's policy address for example — *Quality people, quality home*. I feel sad and even ashamed to be a member of the community if the majority of us strive towards the goals implied in the title. 'Quality people' relegates human beings to the status of instruments or machines. On the other hand, the emphasis, forgive me for being old-fashioned, should be on the family but not merely the home. The home can be a cold, sad and forbidding place if it is a palace without warmth, and warmth comes from care, concern and love, very simple truisms that people wearing the Q word in the mouths often forget, but which all mums know.

Words, especially metaphors, are powerful linguistic tools which we live by. In the tradition of critical discourse, I would make a few contestations about the very use of 'quality' and 'value'. "Quality" is a term borrowed from management studies which privileges an organization's priorities such as getting the most from its employees. To describe a good education as quality education is to say that we are producing 'quality' end products for employers, with perhaps both desirable and undesirable connotations, and to call a good teacher a quality teacher is to relegate her to the role of a tool or a teaching medium. As regards medium, sadly some people believe the computer can excel humans. I am forced to problematise the use of 'value' too. Value can carry either ideological or fiscal overtones. Sadly again these days people tend to privilege the latter over the former. To say we are adding value to a student is hence to say that she will become a more efficient or effective worker, often emphasizing the former. To add value to a teacher is to say that she can teach more students and more courses (though not necessarily for better) and produce more papers (though not necessarily really profound ones that contribute to human knowledge) and attend more committee meetings (though not saying much that makes a lot of sense) for the same salary and perhaps staying at the same rank with the same title and perhaps with not much recognition. Hence, concealed behind the promotion of 'quality' is actually an undue emphasis on *quantity*. And quality is supposed to be measurable and quantifiable, as if the price tag on a bottle of wine determines its flavour. As Foucault observes, auditing is a pervasive organizational tool and complements the amazing gaze of the Panopticon perfectly well.

I would prefer to stay old fashioned and simply use the good old word 'good'. With 'good' we can strive for excellence and even for perfection, but at the same time stay sane and human.

Yours,

Terence Pang
Assistant Professor
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While Mr Pang is apt to point out that 'quality' and 'value-added' are concepts originated from management studies which may not be relevant to the context of higher education, it is less 'what quality is' that worries us, but more the problems raised by the pluralistic view of quality and its measurement such as:

- *Who should define the purposes of higher education? Should it be the government, the students, the employers of students, the managers of institutions or the academic professionals?*
- *How would the conflicting views about higher education and quality be resolved in judging the quality of our institution? Who would determine the priorities?*

So where to from here? Perhaps something about this in a future *Learning Matters*.

