Quality in Higher Education
Developing a Virtue of Professional Practice

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Many countries now employ national evaluation systems to demonstrate publicly that universities provide a quality education. However, the current processes of quality evaluation are often detached from the practices of teaching and learning. In particular, those who teach and those who learn still have to be won over to such audit processes.

This book argues that it is time for the higher education sector to concern itself with the human dimension so as to develop both academic professionalism and students’ commitment to their learning. Based on five completed research projects, which explore academics’ and students’ experiences and their views of quality evaluation, the book argues that developing the intrinsic values of teaching and learning held by academics and students is key to achieving high quality education.

In this book, the author critically reviews the four most frequently used terms related to current quality evaluation: ‘fitness for purpose’, ‘value for money’, ‘student satisfaction’ and ‘students-as-customers’, and argues for a motivationally intelligent quality approach, emphasising the moral dimension and the intrinsic values of academics and students. The author also outlines an improved quality evaluation system that encourages and increases academics’ and students’ commitment to teaching and learning.
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OVERVIEW

Quality is a buzzword in higher education. What is it for you? University teaching, student learning experience, supervision practice, research activities, institutional support mechanisms, or a set of standards and criteria used to measure educational outcomes? Do you define quality by some of the above or all of the above? Perhaps you could add a few more to the list.

Society and the higher education sector worldwide care about quality, so we talk about quality. Higher education institutions are increasingly under public pressure to demonstrate their educational quality and to implement quality mechanisms within each institution. Quality assurance agencies review the institutional quality procedures on a regular basis and share the information with the public, in order to safeguard the quality of universities and colleges.

But what is quality? Why are there so many different opinions on how to understand quality and how to measure it?

Sometimes academics wonder whether the criteria and standards used for measurement purposes really represent what is truly quality (Cheng, 2014). They nevertheless jump through the hoops required, as they feel obliged to use the evaluation to demonstrate to the public that the education they provide is good. Higher education institutions ‘go with the flow’ of quality evaluation, so that they attract students who pay tuition fees, win investment from the funding bodies, and succeed in globally competitive league tables.

Numerous studies, however, reveal that academics feel detached from the process of quality evaluation, as it focuses on managerial control and institutional quality instead of individual academic’s teaching and learning practices (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Cheng, 2009, 2010; Shah, 2013). There is a feeling that quality has been used as an integral component of the spread and location of government power. Academics describe quality as power (Morley, 2003), and as compliance and bureaucracy (Newton, 2002; Cheng, 2010).

Moreover, the models of quality as fitness for purpose and value for money (Harvey & Knight, 1993) have encouraged the expectation that students are customers (DfES, 2003; McCulloch, 2009). The view of students as customers or consumers distances quality from its true meaning of excellence and encourages the view that higher education is a service product. There is an increasing emphasis on the idea that quality is to meet student satisfaction
OVERVIEW

(Shah & Nair, 2012), despite the fact that satisfaction is subjective and emotion-related (Elliott & Shin, 2002). The use of performance indicators and benchmarking has turned quality into an apparently deliberate outcome. Quality could, however, be an enabling process experienced by students and academics, instead of a process that produces designated changes in learners (Cheng, 2014). The above debates suggest that current quality evaluation has not offered the main stakeholders of higher education, such as academics and students, a way out to improve quality, but increases the complexity and the tensions they face.

THE MORAL DIMENSIONS OF QUALITY

This book argues that if quality evaluation increases doubts in academics as professionals, and sacrifices high standards of subject knowledge to increase student satisfaction, and if quality evaluation appears as a never-ending administrative task, it is perhaps because there is nothing to be measured or too much has been measured. The notion of quality could become a trap when used mainly for management purposes, as academics may end up complying with pre-determined standards and performance indicators, and there is no guarantee that they are what academics expect.

Quality only becomes possible if it is used as a useful force for individual academics and students to increase their commitment to learning and teaching, instead of following procedures laid out by a paper trail. The current notion of quality has not been working well with the assumption that all will be well if it makes explicit the standards and criteria for measurement purposes. Instead, we should encourage the use of quality as ‘magic glue’ in our individual journey of pursuing positive learning and teaching experience, once we feel motivated to trust and to enjoy what we do.

The book argues for a motivationally-intelligent quality for individual academics and students by emphasising its moral dimension, i.e., the intrinsic values and wills held by academics and students towards learning and teaching. It interprets quality as a virtue of professional practice, which needs to be supported by quality assurance practitioners, policy-makers and educational developers. Quality can be achieved through rebuilding trust in academic professionalism, developing students’ internal capability to learn, and improving quality evaluation systems to increase academics’ and students’ commitment to teaching and learning.

The argument of quality as a virtue of professional practice is drawn on the findings of five completed research projects. They explored the practice
of quality evaluation and its impact on the work of academics, and on the
student learning experience, from the perceptions of academics and students.
The argument is based on a belief that higher education is for people, and
that it should motivate academics to develop professionally and to support
students to learn how to learn, to get to know themselves, and to reach their
full potential.

QUALITY AS A VIRTUE OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

This book acknowledges that there are different ways of understanding virtue
and there are different kinds of virtue. The concept of virtue is employed by
In contemporary virtue ethics, Julia Driver (2001) contends that the moral
virtues are traits of character that systematically produce good consequences.

In this book, the accounts of quality as a virtue of professional practice
define quality in terms of its value for promoting stakeholders’ intrinsic
excellence and motivation in wanting to learn and to teach in a professional
way. It draws on the theory by Adams (2006) that virtue is a persisting
excellence in being for the good. Quality as a virtue of professional practice
involves more than a momentary action, but a persisting self-motivation to
learn and to work, and to enjoy the state of being an academic or a student.
This involves a perspective in what matters to us and what kind of students
and academics we want to be, in our valuing and caring and choosing in the
process of teaching and learning.

To say that quality is a virtue of professional practice is to insist that
quality is one of the things that makes higher education valuable and worth
participating in, and that makes learning enjoyable. Quality is the objective
and non-instrumental goodness of that which is worthy to be honoured,
loved, and pursued in higher education. It is reflective in the sense that it
enables academics and students to know what they want to achieve, what
they have achieved, how they achieved that, and whether there is any scope
to do better. In other words, quality is embedded with a trust in academic
professionalism, students’ capability to learn, and an improved quality
evaluation system that encourages and increases academics’ and students’
commitment to teaching and learning.

Saying that quality is a virtue of professional practice offers a framework
for stakeholders to self-evaluate their work and their wants and to improve
upon that. It does not provide an algorithm for quality, as we have no
algorithm for excellence. The grounds for judgements of excellence and ways
of being for the good are too varied, and often too subtle for any algorithmic treatment. Reasons can normally be given for judgements of excellence, but the judgement must rely to a considerable extent on moral perceptiveness and moral practice of content, and are not likely to form a deductive system.

Quality as a virtue of professional practice is a matter of personal ability and willingness to govern one’s individual behaviour in accordance with values and commitments. This is because if a person has and acts from virtuous motives, his act is necessarily right (Hursthouse, 1999). Quality as a virtue of professional practice depends largely on the value of what academics and students work for and what they want to achieve from university education. It is beneficial to those who pursue it, as Socrates, Plato and the Stoics held that the nature of virtue makes its possessor a happy or flourishing person. In higher education, a virtue of professional practice will make academics and students develop their confidence and self-knowledge of who they are, what they aim to achieve, and how they should act towards this. They will therefore become confident, open-minded, and have a strong sense of self-worth, and appreciate what they have and what they want to do.

STUDENTS’ AND ACADEMICS’ PERSPECTIVES MATTER

The author of this book is committed to a personal belief that the purpose of higher education is to help students to learn how to learn, to understand themselves and to become the person they are meant to be. This includes the development of students’ minds, their aspirations and capacities, as well as their social- and self-identity. These can be achieved through encouraging the intrinsic desire or motivation of academics and students to improve their learning and teaching, and to enjoy this process. Intrinsic desire to learn and to improve oneself is worth having for its own sake, as it is a key driver for students and academics to become who they want to be, and to become committed to what they do.

Based on the above beliefs, this book draws on the author’s five research projects on quality and quality evaluation over the past decade (Cheng, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011a, 2010b, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015; Cheng et al., 2016) to offer an empirical account of how academics and students understand and experience quality evaluation and how they interpret the concept of quality. These academics and students who took part in the author’s research were from different subject areas in four universities in the UK. One of the universities is world-renowned, another two universities are research intensive, and the fourth university is a post-1992 university which used to
be a polytechnic. This book explores critical issues concerning the idea and measurement of quality, such as quality as transformation, the gap between academics’ and students’ understandings of quality, and student satisfaction. It argues that achieving quality is not just about complying with standards and criteria required by an external quality agency, but is about increasing academics’ and students’ interest and commitment to teaching and learning.

BOOK STRUCTURE

There are eight chapters in this book. Chapter One provides a critical review of the existing understandings of quality. It reclaims the idea of quality from a managerialist approach, and interprets quality as a virtue of professional practice. Chapter Two provides a critical insight into the concept of quality as transformation. It analyses student empowerment, which is the key component of quality as transformation, and identifies the key factors of student empowerment, in order to achieve transformative quality. Based on academics and Masters’ students’ experience of the quality culture in the UK, Chapter Three uses ‘gap analysis’ to reveal that there are varied, and sometimes conflicting, expectations of quality among academics and students. Chapter Four analyses the link between student satisfaction and quality education from the perception of PhD students and PhD supervisors.

Chapter Five argues for the development of students’ internal capability to learn, in order to increase positive learning experiences. Chapter Six proposes the rebuilding of trust in academic professionalism to motivate academics to increase commitment to their work. Chapter Seven offers suggestions on refining quality evaluation systems in order to clarify academics’ responsibility for academic standards, and to strengthen academics’ professionalism through recognition and rewards. The final chapter concludes by highlighting the beneficial effect of treating quality as a virtue of professional practice in improving university teaching and learning.
CHAPTER 1

RECLAIMING QUALITY

INTRODUCTION

Quality has become a key term in higher education since the 1980s. There are a lot of debates on the meaning of quality and its evaluation methods, but quality remains an elusive and contested concept (Harvey & Williams, 2010). This chapter will critically analyse the two most widely used definitions of quality: fitness for purpose and value for money, offering perspectives to policy-makers and quality assurance practitioners on the pros and cons of using these two definitions in the higher education sector.

It argues that these two definitions are important but are being misapplied in practice, as they were originally a utilitarian response to economic needs. The use of these definitions for management purposes ignores the emancipatory power of higher education and the development needs of academics and students. In other words, these two definitions are influenced by management practices in industry, but they do not consider the people-oriented philosophy that management needs to pursue to empower and professionalise the workforce (Hutchins, 1992).

This chapter reclaims the idea of quality from a purely managerialist approach, emphasising that quality is more than the outcome of performance-based measurement and is also a process of increasing academics’ and students’ commitment to teaching and learning. Based on the findings of five completed research projects (Cheng, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013, 2014; Cheng et al., 2016), the chapter proposes developing quality as a virtue of professional practice to support the university to become an organisation where academics and students are devoted to teaching and learning.

FITNESS FOR PURPOSE

There are different interpretations of quality. The most commonly cited definitions are proposed by Harvey and Green (1993). Quality is interpreted as exception, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation. These conceptions offer different analytical frameworks to consider the meaning of quality in higher education (Lomas, 2002).
Fitness for purpose has become the most widely adopted approach to evaluate quality in higher education (Woodhouse, 1996). The origins of quality as fitness for purpose can be dated back to the Total Quality Management philosophy in industry. It emphasises the establishment of national and institutional structures for evaluating quality (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004), and it takes on the practice of assuring structural, organisational, and managerial processes within institutions (Westerheijden et al., 2007). Quality as fitness for purpose, in this sense, can be understood as systems and process control.

The wide use of quality as fitness for purpose in higher education suggests that quality has become a management concept for government, funding councils, and higher education institutions. The term ‘management’ here means ‘authoritative control over the affairs of others’, or ‘an act or instance of guiding’ (Hutchins, 1992, p. 11). For example, fitness for purpose is used by funding councils as a criterion of resource allocation. Barnett (1992) interpreted it as a means of legitimising a differential funding base for higher education institutions while proportionately reducing resources for it. This performance-based approach increases the inequality of funding among institutions, especially when the decisions of quality assurance agencies have a great influence on the allocation of resources among institutions and programmes (Skolnik, 2010). This has led to increased emphasis on accountability, in that institutions have “the obligation to report to others, explain, justify and answer questions about how resources have been used” (Amaral, 2007, p. 38).

Fitness for purpose aims for management by objectives. It allows institutions to define their purposes in their mission and objectives, and quality is demonstrated by achieving these. For example, fitness for purpose has been used to form the basis of the Quality Assurance Agency review methodology in the UK, and the goals of the higher education institution are articulated through its mission statement and the aims and learning outcomes of a programme (Macfarlane & Ottewill, 2004). The institutional missions are normally explained with desired objectives, and there is fitness for purpose displayed in that the curricula and their delivery should enable students to achieve the intended aims. However, it might be difficult to assess the objectives with either a qualitative or quantitative measure, as the objectives might not be stated clearly or implied easily. Furthermore, the focus on institutional missions doesn’t evaluate the quality of the educational process and its outcomes but strengthens external influences on the performance of the institution (Dill, 2001). This ignores that there is a fundamental difference
between the actual practice of teaching and learning and the current ways in which institutions are evaluated for their performance (Haggis, 2009).

An Analysis of the Purpose

Purpose is a key component in the definition of quality as fitness for purpose, but there is no agreement on what purpose and for whose purpose. One view is that the purpose is to meet the needs of students and employers as customers. This is evidenced in the 2003 White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003) that makes quality become a means for customer satisfaction. The link between quality and customers suggests that quality management in higher education is similar to the approach developed in industry that quality is customer focused. This user-based definition makes quality individual and subjective, as the expectations of customers can vary, and it contradicts the current practice of quality evaluation in higher education which checks institutional performance instead of individual student’s learning experience.

Purpose is often associated with the economy’s needs and the government’s political ambitions of changing the way institutions work in a more competitive and economical way internationally. For example, the UK government wants to achieve better linkage between higher education and the labour market through the establishment of quality assurance (van Vught & Westerheijiden, 1994). The concept of quality has therefore been used as a competitive weapon, and it results in a profit and consumerism culture. Institutions are demanded to provide students with transferrable skills which have been accompanied by performance indicators, for example graduate employability (O’Brien & Hart, 1999). However, this pragmatic approach, focusing on skills-related training and the economy’s needs, does not consider the people-building purpose of higher education and the improvement purpose of quality management (Harvey, 2002).

The use of fitness for purpose for the economy stresses competition, results, and the application of the free market in the funding of higher education (Moltz, 2010). It aims for short-term benefit, and has created concerns in the higher education sector, including compliance to pre-determined indicators without considering the diversity of learning and teaching (Hodson & Thomas, 2003; Skolnik, 2010), the gap between academics’ and students’ understandings of quality (Cheng, 2012), and the emerging consumer culture which focuses on meeting students’ needs instead of teaching students how to learn (Molesworth et al., 2009).
One implication of the above concerns is that quality evaluation emphasises objectives, documentation, and using institutional quality mechanisms to ensure standards. However, it ignores the inspirational philosophy developed in industry that quality is more than management and is people-oriented (Crosby, 1979). The people-oriented philosophy means that management is closely linked to the workforce, and that people need to be empowered, professionalised, and given the opportunity to tackle the problems they recognise and have the skills to solve them (Hutchins, 1992).

The overemphasis on quality for management purposes provokes a fear that higher education institutions need to compete against each other for funding and ranking purposes, and to attract students. It also causes insecurity and distrust towards quality evaluation among academics who are the most precious resource in the higher education sector. According to Deming’s theory of management, fear results in loss (Drummond, 1992). This means that fear will force individual institutions and academics to concentrate upon satisfying rules of quality evaluation, and treating it as a box-ticking exercise, at the expense of making a real contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning.

Cheng’s (2009) research on the quality audit culture in England suggests that there is a tension between academics’ notion of professionalism and the requirements of quality assurance, and academics feel that quality assurance is detached from their individual academic work. This implies that if the quality imperative is based on pressure from the market and from the Government, it won’t be recognised as an inner need for improvement by academics. Achieving quality education has been part of the tradition of academics, and academics have always enjoyed a certain amount of flexibility in managing their own work. When the outside world begins to evaluate quality based on pre-determined standards and criteria, academics may feel that the quality expected is different from what they would like to pursue for continuous professional improvement.

VALUE FOR MONEY

The notion of value for money is another popular view of quality in higher education, and it was first presented by the 1984 Audit Commission (Watty, 2003). It associates quality with expense and economic exchange, and originally meant that customers are willing to pay for better quality, and what pleases a customer most is superior quality for the same money or less money (Drummond, 1992).
The notion of accountability is central to the definition of quality as value for money, and it is closely related to the “economic ideology” that education should contribute to a country’s industrial development (Salter & Tapper, 1994). In other words, the Government looks for a good return on investment in higher education, and it uses the funding councils to audit the performance of the institutions, in order to assure that money allocated to the universities is properly and effectively used.

According to Saunders (2011), the understanding of quality as value for money is influenced by neoliberal ideology, as the relationship between students and their institutions/teachers becomes defined in economic terms. Neoliberalism is a term that is used to include economic, social, and political ideas, policies, and practices, functioning on both individual and institutional levels (Plehwe, Walpen, & Neunhoffer, 2006; Saad-Filho & Johnson, 2005), which are largely extreme versions of classical liberalism (Baez, 2007). Neoliberalism advocates a self-regulating market (Polyani, 1944), and it redefines individuals as consumers who use a cost-benefit analysis to make all of their decisions (Giroux, 2005). There is a concern that a neoliberal university is strongly associated with an economic rather than a cultural imperative, which makes its internationalisation degenerate into instrumentalism (Harris, 2008).

The Customer Orientation

The notion of student as customer first appeared in the US in the 1960s where students exercised their preferences by choosing their universities. Tuition fees have shifted student expectation of and attitudes towards higher education, although some European countries, for example, Germany, have not taken up the fee systems. One observation is that students perceive themselves as customers purchasing a product (George, 2007). Hayes (2009) describes students as vulnerable learners, instead of autonomous persons pursuing knowledge.

The notion of quality as value for money is closely related to this customer orientation, and it suggests the application of free-market logic to the relationship between students and the institution/academics. The change in students’ attitudes and expectation of higher education has manifested in increased focus on grades, the priority of financial outcomes over educational outcomes (Clayson & Haley, 2005), the emphasis on customer service (Titus, 2008), and the provision of training for students’ employability (Sharrock, 2000).
There are debates on whether the notion of student as customer is appropriate in the higher education sector. One view is that the customer identity affects the expectation of the university community, as it defines who is responsible for students’ education (Clayson & Haley, 2005), how academics engage with students, and how to measure progress and quality (Molesworth et al., 2009).

Another perspective is that the concept of customer-defined quality is problematic (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Houston, 2008; Saunders, 2011), as improvement is more likely to result from approaches that encourage students’ effort in learning than from the imposition of definitions and methodologies from industry. The conceptualisation of students as customers will therefore decrease students’ focus on learning and lead to a passive approach to education (Saunders, 2011).

Students do not fit the traditional model of customers in that customers are free to purchase whichever products they want in free markets, whereas students’ freedom of choice is limited. They need to satisfy the university entry criteria before they can ‘purchase’ an educational ‘product’ (George, 2007). Students cannot simply purchase their degrees even after they are accepted by the university, and nor can they return them if they are unhappy (Watson, 2000; Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; George, 2007).

Education is a complex and creative process due to the differences in students, such as their preferred methods of learning, their unique learning expectation, and their level of commitment and confidence in achieving personal goals. Students need to make the effort to learn and they depend on academics to guide them to reach their goals. There is more than an economic exchange between students and their institutions/teachers, so the application of free-market logic to the relationship between the student and the institution/academics is inaccurate (Saunders, 2011).

Furthermore, there is conflict in the perceived role of academics as subject experts and their perceived role of providing a purchased product to a student, as students lack the experience to understand the subject fields that they choose to study (Redding, 2005). Students may not know if the education has met their needs until years after their graduation (Winston, 1999). This differs from the customer-related truism that ‘the customer knows best’, and that ‘the customers know what they want’ (Winston, 1999).

The customer model also suggests undue distance between the student and the educational process and it compartmentalises the educational experience as a product, as opposed to a process (McMillan & Cheney, 1996). This could lead to a gap between how academics and students expect and understand
quality. For example, Cheng (2011) reveals that academics tend to associate quality with students’ learning experience, but students are pragmatic and relate quality to academic teaching practice and its impact on their learning outcomes. This gap implies that if we treat educational experience as a product, it may encourage the view that students need ‘spoon-feeding’ from academics, as they have paid for the education. Academics therefore need to clarify that students should take an active role in the learning process, as learning is active.

Williams (2012) provides an historical analysis of the notion of consumerism and points out that the prevailing sense of service ‘entitlement’ potentially would create new markers around beneficial higher education experiences, which are fundamentally disconnected from intellectual engagement. Cheng et al. (2016) hold similar concerns that the demand to produce satisfied consumers may force lecturers to avoid making intellectual challenges of their students and instead teach to provide entertainment. This indicates that the notion of students as customers downplays students’ responsibility in learning, and it does not consider the continuous improvement purpose of higher education. This has resulted in unresolved tension between the purpose of control and the purpose of improvement in learning (Brown, 2014). There is a need for increased responsibility by higher education institutions to manage student expectations and to put appropriate mechanisms in place to handle this consumerist culture (Jones, 2010).

QUALITY IS MORE THAN MANAGEMENT

Clearly, both notions of fitness for purpose and value for money relate quality to the input and accountability from academics and higher education institutions. They emphasise institutional performance and judgement by external quality agencies, and performance is related to an institution’s proficiency in having quality mechanisms in place. This approach assumes that the quality of students’ learning depends on the management of academics’ practice and the support and training provided by the universities. It reflects a ‘passive’ view of quality and student learning, ignoring that learning is an individual activity and that students’ interest and commitment in learning are as important as the input from academics and the university.

QUALITY AS A VIRTUE OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

This book argues for a different understanding of quality. It interprets quality as a virtue of professional practice, promoting the intrinsic values and
commitment held by academics and students towards teaching and learning. Virtue here refers to a persisting excellence in being for the good (Adams, 2006). This argument is based on the author’s belief that a successful higher education produces learners who are intellectually curious, reflective, and independent. The development of graduate attributes in UK universities, such as effective communication, confidence and respect for others’ views, is a sign of and a response to such a belief.

The consumer culture may encourage a view among students that university exists to produce grades and to train students to find jobs, and that distinctions in the jobs market are based on those grades. There is some truth in this, and there can also be the case of students who simply wish to obtain the best class of degree that they can, regardless of what they actually learn. However, the purpose of higher education can become lost if students pursue the sole learning outcome of a degree classification, rather than developing themselves and exploring their limits and inclinations.

Academics’ duty involves more than providing training for their students to pass exams, and to become researchers, and also involves developing students to fulfill their potential and to learn how to learn. For example, Golde and Dore (2001) question the extent to which the institutes are able to train the next generation of researchers. They examine the training graduate students received at 27 major US universities and conclude that:

The training doctoral students receive is not what they want, nor does it prepare them for the jobs they take… The data from this study show that in today’s doctoral programs, there is a three-way mismatch between student goals, training and actual careers.

The frustrations felt by academics and students in understanding and realising the pragmatic purpose of higher education for the market suggest that quality in higher education means not only support for student experience, but also development of depth of student thinking. Quality as a virtue of professional practice fits well in this context; it is motivationally intelligent. It focuses on the moral dimension of quality through encouraging academics, students and institutions to reach an agreement on how to support students to learn, how to improve academics’ teaching practice, and how to use quality evaluation for continuous improvement. This will involve academics’ and students’ persisting self-motivation, and their ability and willingness to govern individual behaviour in accordance with the values of teaching and learning in the higher education sector.
Research reveals that learning can be highly influenced by the degree to which an individual student actively participates in and becomes emotionally committed to their learning (Alexander & Murphy, 1998; Khaola, 2014). The factors include students’ intrinsic motivation to learn, and their capability and confidence in exercising their agency to set up personal goals and achieve these. None of these factors have been measured or covered in the current quality evaluation process. This explains why the use of quality for management purposes has been questioned within academic communities, as it is antithetical to the interests and goals of those concerned with improving the learning experience of students.

This book argues that a successful learning experience depends on students’ ambition and commitment to learning, and that it is a team work and shared effort of three key stakeholders of higher education: academics, universities, and students. Students need to take responsibility for their own learning; as to teach is to aim for the achievement of student learning, but not necessarily to achieve it. Higher education has an important role to support students to become confident, capable, and well-adjusted in order to lead a full life in modern society. Quality evaluation thus needs to consider the complexity of the educational process and increase the support for both academics and students to become committed to teaching and learning.

Quality is a multidimensional concept. It is essential that we become clear in the meanings we are giving to the term of quality. Quality evaluation has been relegated to the role of a performance-oriented procedure, rather than being a planning operation to increase academics’ and students’ commitment to teaching and learning. As Professor McIntyre points out, when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure (McIntyre, 1993). The paperwork required for compliance with quality benchmarks has been treated as a box-ticking exercise. It will continue to be counter-productive to improvement and efficiency if there is no improvement in academics’ and students’ engagement with quality evaluation.

We need to change our mindsets of understanding quality and use the notion of quality to support students to fulfill their potential, and to develop the professional practice of academics, in order to make them become confident and motivated in what they are doing. Quality management involves more than monitoring and guidance. It needs to focus on understanding and developing the potential of workforces (Hutchins, 1992). Success will follow when an individual is motivated to do a job, and he/she then has the ability and possesses sufficient confidence to undertake the task. We need
to encourage the shift in quality evaluation from an external operation to a
people-oriented process for improvement and engagement, in order to achieve
a balance between control and commitment. This will involve a people-
driven approach to developing quality as a virtue of professional practice,
which considers the values, cultures, and traditions of key stakeholders of
the higher education sector.
CHAPTER 2

STUDENT EMPOWERMENT AND TRANSFORMATIVE QUALITY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is going to critically analyse another widely used interpretation of quality in the higher education sector: quality as transformation. It is proposed by Harvey and Green (1993) that the empowerment of the student is a key element of transformative quality, as education is an ongoing process of transformation of students, including their cognitive transcendence in the learning process. Harvey (2006) develops further this idea and argues that transformation is intentional and developmental by nature, as it involves more than the empowerment of students, the development and change that occurs in students, and involves changes within an institution to encourage student transformation. Student empowerment in this sense holds considerable promise for improving university education, and achieving quality as transformation involves a continual spiral of empowerment for the students embracing the transformative process. This is because empowerment enables students to make responsible decisions about how to learn and what they want to learn.

One of the author’s research projects reviews the concept of quality as transformation from the perspectives of PhD students and PhD supervisors. It reveals that the concept is perceived as important, and that quality and transformation are interpreted as different but interrelated concepts (Cheng, 2014). According to the PhD students and supervisors, transformation involves five forms of development: intellectual, critical, personal, emotional and physical. Quality is interpreted as goodness, and something valuable and meaningful. Intellectual transformation is associated with the development of thinking that leads to changed perspectives about life and subjects. Critical transformation is progressive, starting with uncertainty and developing from students’ reflection and discussion. Personal transformation involves a change in individuals’ opinions, behaviour and attitudes. Emotional transformation refers to a psychological change in becoming motivated to learn; and physical transformation relates to a change of environment or an age-related physical feature change. Student transformation is often related
to uncertainty and change which cannot be quantified by pre-determined standards and criteria used to measure quality (Cheng, 2014).

Based on the findings of Cheng (2014), this chapter is going to scrutinise the concepts of quality and student transformation in depth, by focusing on the aspect of empowerment of the student. It will analyse what is empowerment and whether the measurement of quality would empower students and improve their learning experience. It will argue that empowerment is a construct shared by academics, students, universities, and society, involving the process of creating trusting relations between academics and students. This chapter will point out that the notion of empowerment offers universities the promise of a better experience of teaching and learning, but quality evaluation has not realised the promise that the idea of empowerment holds. This is because higher education institutions are now expected to be accountable to their students not only in terms of academic performance and programme completion, but also job placement. This, however, ignores the nature of learning in that students’ personal factors, including interest, motivation, habits and commitment and capability to learn, will significantly influence the results of student learning. Some of these factors depend on students’ personal choices and they are out of the reach of academic staff. There is a danger if universities focus on giving students the power in order to promote empowerment, rather than encouraging them to develop the power they have within, because student power ultimately derives from their self-trust and self-trustworthiness.

This chapter concludes by arguing for the importance of cultivating student interest, motivation, and commitment to learning, as well as improving the opportunities and resources for students to gain experiences and skills, which will enable them to gain control over their study. It lays the groundwork for a theory of quality as a virtue of professional practice to increase students’ commitment and to develop their capability to learn.

EMPOWERMENT OF THE STUDENT

The concept of empowerment has become used prevalently in educational practice and research since Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which investigates the relationship between power and education. Freire conceives empowerment as involving a process of dialogic “conscientisation” where teachers and learners together read “the word and the world” (Freire, 1970).

Other researchers develop further the concept of empowerment and describe it as multi-dimensional and as a process that challenges our
assumptions about the way things are and can be. Spreitzer (1997) proposes that empowerment includes meaning, competence, self-determination, impact, and choice. Meaning refers to an individual’s extent of caring about a task; competence is an individual’s belief about their capability to skilfully complete their work activities; self-determination is one’s sense of control or autonomy over one’s work; and impact is the degree to which individuals view their behaviour as making a difference to their work and the wider community.

Empowerment is also interpreted as occurring within sociological, psychological, and economic spheres, and in relationship with others, whether individual, group, or community. For example, Harvey and Burrows (1992) examine the underlying contentious power relations between academics and students. They describe empowerment as a process in which academics lose their power over the intellectual process and the academic content. This suggests that the result of the empowerment process could be enhanced power on the part of students. How the education system transforms students’ ability and self-awareness will depend on how students are empowered. To demystify the concept of empowerment, this chapter is going to explore first the concept of power. It will then interpret how power is conceptualised as the core concept of empowerment, and look at whether to empower means to give students power to improve their learning experiences and emancipatory potential.

**Power**

For most people, power can be related easily to words like control and domination, as it can be a formal, delegated authority to act or to decide. Traditional social science interprets power as unchangeable, and as influence, control, and a commodity or structure divorced from human actions (Lips, 1991). Weber (1946) develops this idea of power, describing it as not existing in isolation, but as created in relationships. In other words, power is related to our ability to make others do what we want, regardless of their own wishes or interests, so power and power relationships are changeable. Weber’s view is shared by contemporary research which defines quality as a process that is characterised by collaboration, sharing, and mutuality (Kreisberg, 1992). This aspect of power has been described in different terms, such as relational power (Lappe & DuBois, 1994), generative power (Korten, 1987), and integrative power (Kreisberg, 1992).