

Higher Education

The Quality of Education and Its Evaluation

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This presentation is based for the most part on articles prepared for the World Conference on Higher Education held in October 1998 by UNESCO. These articles were the outcome of broad-based consultations at the international level and reflect both the diversity of opinions on the quality of higher education and the ideas on which a consensus has been reached.

Higher education is the highest level of the educational system and aims to provide training that will yield high-caliber, responsible citizens and qualified workers. In recent years, the standardization of academic education has led to an explosion of the demand for higher education and its breakdown. Increased budgetary constraints entailed by policies of generalizing basic education to which priority is given, at the level of international organizations, are working together to confront the difficulty confronting an institution such as the school institution, upon which a long-term perspective devolves, to respond to rapid changes in the more or less specific demands of employers. The relative loss of interest in primary and secondary level technical and vocational training on the part of families and employers alike, is also putting increased pressure on higher education. Under this dual constraint, governments are tending to back out, at least partially, from the education offer, leaving more room for other stakeholders in education.

The quality of education is a new issue today. It is something that parents are demanding increasingly, in a more or less strong and explicit manner, and emerges as a necessity for governments who see therein, with the encouragement of international organizations, a factor of competitiveness, and for the poorest of the poor and others who are not so poor, a way of extricating themselves from poverty and resolving the recurring problems of unemployment and underemployment.

The final report of the Commission on the Quality of Higher Education at the World Conference on Higher Education organized by UNESCO in 1998 explains as follows:

“Quality is a complex, dynamic, historically constructed and multifaceted concept, often defined by what is lacking rather than by its contents. It reflects national, regional and global socio-economic, cultural and political visions.” [UNESCO, 1998a: 2]

Quality is indeed a relative concept, and when assessed, results from the expectations and perceptions of various players at a given time. It is therefore

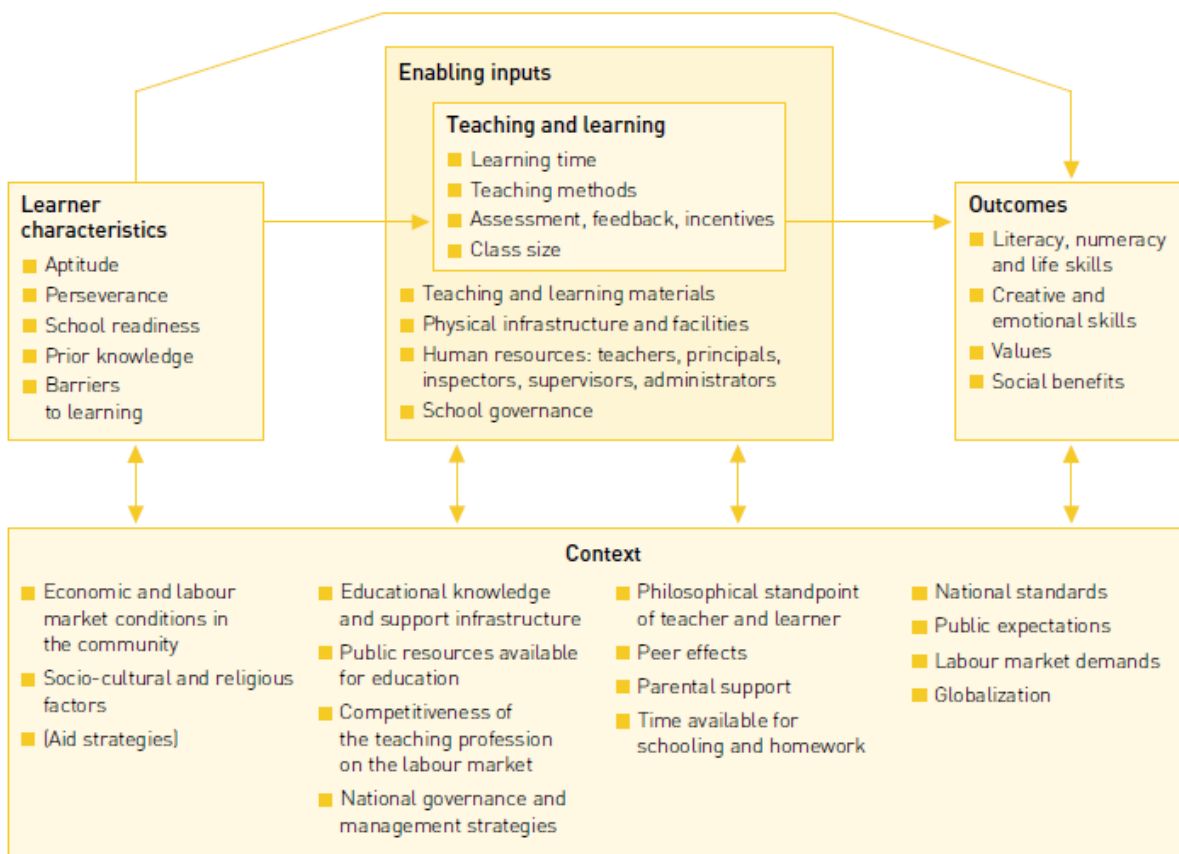
“... a multi-dimensional concept and it is not possible to arrive at one set of quality standards applicable to all countries and against which institutions can be assessed”, [Ekong D. 1998: 6]

as stated in the declaration made subsequent to consultations in the Asia-Pacific region in preparation for the World Conference on Higher Education, as well an open-ended concept. As pointed out in the Global Monitoring Report 2005, Education for All, by UNESCO:

“Although opinions about quality in education are by no means unified, at the level of international debate and action three principles tend to be broadly shared. They can be summarized as the need for more relevance, for greater equity of access and outcome and for proper observance of individual rights.” [UNESCO, 2004: 30]

Although these principles remain too general to guide what is being done, there nevertheless exists a consensus on the benefits that can be expected from improving the quality of higher education, and therefore calling for this improvement as a matter of necessity. The problem is that the need for quality permeates the entire higher education process, from inputs to outcomes, including the process itself and the context (see table below):

Figure 1.1: A framework for understanding education quality



Source: UNESCO, 2004: 36

Although it is true that

“the issue of quality cannot be dissociated from the quest for excellence and the need to establish evaluation criteria”, [UNESCO, 1998b: 4]

education quality criteria should enable a conciliation, to the extent possible, of the sometimes contradictory priorities of the stakeholders in education at the national level, to ensure the compliance as well as the sustainability of institutions of higher learning, but at the regional and international levels. Indeed,

“the universality of higher education implies that there must be a concern to clarify the standards quality and relevance above and beyond the standards specific to given contexts.” [UNESCO, 1998c: 4]

It is therefore up to each system, each institution, to put these priorities in order so as to deal with the constraints (budgetary, organizational, etc.) and to state them in the form of assessable objectives in order to measure the progress achieved. International integration is now, however, an integral part of the concept of education quality at the university level, which makes it mandatory to strengthen cooperation arrangements and exchanges among institutions of higher learning in different countries and zones, and to have the partners take into account the specificities of each system.

Quality assurance has grown in recent years to meet this need for measurement.

“A quality assurance system is the means by which an institution confirms to itself and to others that conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards that the institution has set.” [UNESCO, 1998a: 5]

Quality assurance must go hand in hand with a strengthening of the self-sufficiency of institutions of higher learning in order to enable them to make decisions in all areas relating to quality. However, it is doubtful that this system will enable an objective measurement of quality, in particular for purposes of comparison among systems, among institutions, as long as the very concept of quality is subjective and heterogeneous and in view of the diversity of education “niches” made available by an increasing number of operators and the increasingly diversified nature, and given the very heterogeneity of institutions offering to ensure the quality of higher education. The liability of the higher education system is great, because the choices made in the realm of higher education are rarely reversible. On the other hand, inasmuch as

“The quality of higher education is closely dependent upon an evaluation and regulation of a systemic nature. This suggests that a culture of assessment will be inculcated in the institution (. . . and) a culture of regulation . . . to improve the effectiveness of what is being done or to readjust objectives and actions as needed. This again implies a culture of self-sufficiency, of liability and accountability.” [UNESCO, 1998c: 6]

Quality assurance must not be viewed as an instrument to measure quality but as a tool for assessing the compliance of institutions of higher learning with the principle of the quest for quality, and as a process by which quality can be improved. Quality assurance requires for that matter both external evaluation and self-evaluation, appropriate for inculcating this culture of assessment and regulation so necessary for quality improvement.

It may be tempting to try to measure quality, which would at least provide simple signals enabling the players to position themselves on the markets and to promote budget adjudications, but these signs are an oversimplification of a complex reality. Due to its nature, quality is seen more as an objective to be reached out for than as an objective that can actually be attained. Although measuring does indeed enable the assessment of a start-up situation, it is subsequently in the ongoing quest for quality process that resides its potential for improvement and not in the final outcome of the process.

References

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