Giving the Body of Knowledge a Voice

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As someone who has been studying how quality is defined in higher education and how its quality assurance mechanisms interpret the definitions, what is striking is the difference in perceptions from academics, educational professionals, and non-academics (employers, policy makers, regulators, and members of the community at large) regarding quality and quality assurance. Whether a person is what Boiral and Roy (2007) call a quality enthusiast or a dissident, the decision to become one or the other rests with perceived expectations based on regulatory compliance or, more realistically, his or her own view of what quality is in a college or university environment. Regardless of perspective, the aim of this journal, *Quality Approaches in Higher Education (QAHE)*, is to create a venue that may be outside the comfort zone of many of the potential contributors (cf. Ibarra & Hunter, 2007) to provide a forum for all whose practice and/or research add to the understanding of quality and quality assurance in higher education. To paraphrase Quinn (2005), *QAHE* seeks to move the narrative of quality from a normal state to a fundamental state in which the conversation moves from what one “knows” to venturing beyond familiar territory, based on one’s values, learning from this environment, and recognizing when there is a need for change.

The Journal’s Focus

Quality as a model was declared a fad as far back as 2000 by Robert Birnbaum, but if it is a fad why is it that the ideas and tenets from the world of quality are driving the discussion in the accreditation/external review world? Look at how the language and ideas proposed by the *National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity* are framing change for higher education in the United States (Padró, in press b). Simply, in a world environment in which accountability expectations for higher education institutions and systems continue to grow because of perceived deficits (Dill & Beerkens, 2010), quality is based on policy steering (Padró, 2009; Dill & Beerkens, 2010). Quality assurance often is posited as part of a balance between external control and internal improvement (Danø & Stensaker, 2009), therefore placing discussions of academic and academic support matters in a quality framework only makes sense. *QAHE* was created to provide a forum for the body of knowledge in higher education from all sectors, and regardless of viewpoint, to discuss issues related to good and excellent practices and/or how programs and processes in higher education can be improved. It is intended as a venue where:

- academic staff (faculty) from the different disciplines present their findings and ideas related to performance issues;
- student service professionals and academics can discuss how student engagement and other campus practices performed in support of students can express their theories and findings;
- specialists in centers dedicated to the scholarship of teaching and learning can showcase their research;
- institutional researchers can inform the higher education community at large;
• other members of the campus community can share their work; and
• policymakers and external regulators can engage in the discussion of how to make higher education the best it can be.

Framing the Quality Literature in Higher Education

“The theoretical link between quality management practices and firm performance has not been clearly understood” (Linderman, Schroeder, Zaheer, Liedke, & Choo, 2004, p. 604). For example, there is little empirical evidence that institutional accreditation as practiced in the United States has been effective in assuring academic standards (Dill & Beerkens, 2010). There is James’ (2005) cautionary observation that learner outcomes are potentially problematic because too much is expected from them while they may have the unintended consequence of limiting or restricting learning because it commodifies knowledge. Also, issues articulated by Geoff Scott’s (2004) forces of change enter the conversation on external reviews; learner outcomes (especially the competencies these represent); student engagement and its nexus with satisfaction; access; opportunity/diversity; and globalization and internationalization of higher education. Assessment and evaluation form integral aspects of accountability within a quality framework; however, questions abound as to whether learning and its effects can be effectively measured quantitatively and if other forms of evidence will be recognized as sufficiently rigorous to get recognition as legitimate data. There are curricular and programmatic development and implementation issues as well as co-curricular support activities and approaches that are part of the quality discussion. So too are contradictions and tensions surrounding academic (professional) development (Lee & McWilliam, 2008), divergent faculty conceptions of “leading” and “management” in the area of learning and teaching (Marshall, Orrell, Cameron, Bosanquet, & Thomas, 2011), strategic considerations of scholarship of teaching and learning (Palmer, Holt, & Challis, 2011), and differing faculty (academic staff) evaluation approaches (Padró, 2011), among other salient meta-topics that can and should frame the quality literature in higher education.

Diversity in Research and Viewpoints

The question when discussing quality is, to quote Zemsky, Wegner, and Massy (2005), “[w]here there a good definition of quality, were educational products designed and engineered, and if the academic workforce understood its role in achieving a quality product, would the result be a better educational product?” (p. 140). Therefore, we are not looking for any one form of research. Qualitative studies are as welcome as quantitative research papers. Conceptual papers, policy pieces, best practices, and case studies are welcome as well. The requirements these articles must meet are rigor, the ability to generate reader interest, timeliness, and the ability to expand the body of knowledge. In this regard, our outlook is based on what Bertalanffy (1968) observed about adding to the body of knowledge of systems:

It may be preferable first to have a nonmathematical model with its shortcomings but expressing some previously unnoticed aspect, hoping for future development of a future algorithm, than to start with premature mathematical models following known algorithms and, therefore, possibly restricting the field of vision. (p. 24)

This journal wants to be a forum for different viewpoints discussing issues relevant to quality in higher education. The body of knowledge in higher education is more than what Foucault (1980) termed “a polymorphous ensemble of intellectuals who virtually all pass through and relate themselves to the academic system” (p. 127). Campuses are multi-disciplinary in nature because of the tripartite composition of a campus—academic affairs, business affairs, and student services—along with the many academic and professional disciplines taught. Therefore, QAHE must be interdisciplinary in scope and look for contributions from faculty and other professionals working on campus. Given the myriad structural permutations within a higher education institution in terms of function, mission (and in some instances covenant), personnel, and what is taught, what must be remembered is Maturana and Varela’s (1992) observation that structural coupling and human dynamics “entails a reflection enabling us to see that as human beings we have only the world we create with others—whether we like them or not” (p. 246).

QAHE desires to be a journal that looks at quality from all aspects of higher education and from all different perspectives. For many, quality as a concept is not the issue. The approach, language, and model toward the concept are the issues. Those interested in quality cannot dismiss or ignore the view espoused at the beginning of the 20th century by Thorstein Veblen (1965/1918) who believed “the intrusion of business principles in the universities goes to weaken and retard the pursuit of learning, and therefore to defeat the ends for which a university is maintained” (p. 165). It is alive and well today (Aly & Akpovi, 2001; Felder & Brent, 1999). Many teachers in the humanities and social sciences believe that way. Some would even argue that the reliance on external funding has impacted the views of those pursuing research in the natural sciences (cf. Stokes, 1997). On the other hand, Feigenbaum (1993) implies that competition within systems reflects the international competition between the educational infrastructures of nations in relation to quality,
e.g., how campuses and systems develop work and teamwork knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This feeling was anticipated by Clark Kerr who wrote in 1963 that “more than ever, education is inextricably involved in the quality of a nation” (p. 87). While adoption has been slow and piecemeal (Kanji, Tambi, & Wallace, 1999), quality management and assessment are more widely accepted today (Kitagawa, 2003), even if there are “fundamental differences of view of the appropriate relationship that should be established between higher education institutions and their external evaluators” (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005, p. 11). To paraphrase Brubacher (1977), scholarly expertise is being called on to extend the concepts of industrial production to mitigate the social evils existing as a result of the existing economic order.

Veblen’s view reflects why many individuals within academics look at quality and quality assurance from an ultra-pessimistic perspective of minimizing regret, playing what economists call a minimaxing strategy (Padró, in press a). This feeds into the often-found traits of problematic preferences, unclear technologies, and fluid participation (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). Consequently, “[w]hat becomes tightly or loosely coupled in this symbolic system is related to a mixture of collegial interactions, bureaucratic structures, ongoing coalitions, chance, and cognitive processes by which people make inferences and judgments under conditions of uncertainty” (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 160). Under these conditions, even small misunderstandings about quality and quality plans have the potential to form inaccurate perceptions if key ideas about the system are not understood (Folkerts, 2007). As a consequence of the dynamic, sometimes seemingly contradicting, and interdisciplinary nature of higher education, this journal has to embody Niels Bohr’s theory of complementarity posited in 1927 to focus on what the different articles and perspectives have in common rather than focusing on the discrepancies. According to Bohr (1963):

… it must be recognized that such evidence which appears contradictory when combination into a single picture is attempted, exhausts all conceivable knowledge about the object. Far from restricting our efforts to put questions to nature in the form of experiments, the notion of *complementarity* simply characterizes the answers we can receive by such inquiry, whenever the interaction between the measuring instruments and the objects forms an integral part of the phenomena… Likewise we must be prepared that evidence, which obtained by different, mutually exclusive… arrangements, may exhibit unprecedented contrast and even at first sight appear contradictory… (pp. 5, 12)

**The Rewards of Publishing in QAHE**

What are the rewards of publishing in *QAHE*? First and foremost there is the reward of sharing information and advancing the discussion and the body of knowledge of quality approaches throughout the campus. Hopefully, there is a professional reward of recognition and professional advancement. This last point is a particular challenge for academic staff seeking upward mobility through the academic *cursus honorum* because an interdisciplinary venue for publication is not always recognized as an “appropriate widget” depending on type of institution or national protocols dictating how to account for scholarship. Some colleges and universities are comfortable following the more expansive definition of scholarship as proposed by Boyer (1990), but others prefer the more traditional singular-focused approach toward publication that recompenses specialized research in a subject area and discourages ancillary interests in the field. Such a mindset has created problems for many academic staff who are interested in the teaching and learning aspects of their discipline. Similarly, those interested in evaluating teaching face the same challenge. If the metaprofessional model of teaching suggested by Arreola, Theall & Aleamoni (2003) holds, the many dimensions of teaching in higher education become a legitimate subtopic within the disciplines. For all of the rhetoric at the national and international levels about the importance of teaching and considering teaching as important as research, academic recognition is typically lacking. The same holds for those individuals interested and/or involved in external review activity within the campus. External reviews require academic staff input and participation. Their output needs to be recognized as well.

As someone who has been intimately involved in the tenure and promotion process of faculty at teaching institutions and involved in a number of external institutional and program reviews in the United States over the years, I have seen the aforementioned challenges first hand. What is striking is the “star chamber” quality of the processes and decisions impacting academic staff performance recognition. The best way to describe the attempt at countering the secretive nature of decisions and deliberations is what Weick (1995) calls sensemaking, simply because academic staff make strategic choices based on extracted cues that may be plausible but not necessarily accurate. For those involved in the decision making, *QAHE* commits itself to recognition in the various journal indexes and to climb the so-called ratings ladder as expeditiously as it can be managed. The journal is about quality and thus it strives for excellence on its own. It is a relatively new journal, yet, it is one that seeks to become a more visible voice in higher education. For those academic staff seeking a publication venue, it is our goal to make the journal a
recognized place for people in different disciplines to share their work. For researchers whose area(s) of interest do not really have a home, for example, those involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning at campus centers or improving the doctoral studies experience, we want to make sure you have a place that will be interested in your work.

The talk about academic staff is not meant to minimize contributions from other campus professionals. The opposite is the case. As a proud, long-standing member of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), I want to invite student services professionals to consider publishing with us. Quality as a concept and as a model is embedded in the topics represented in the field’s research agenda as proposed by NASPA’s Q-list and continuing efforts at identifying the future direction of research in the student services. So much is happening in the sector that it is important for student personnel professionals to share their practices and research so that they, too, contribute to shaping and expanding the body of knowledge relating to higher education. The same holds true for institutional researchers and other individuals performing research within colleges and universities to better inform the internal and external stakeholders of current developments. We also welcome submissions from accrediting bodies and regulatory agencies at different government levels because their perspective and activities are now integral to the understanding of colleges and universities at the institutional as well as systems level. The reality is that many of these professionals within campuses and outside them have their own publications and venues for promoting discussion; yet, QAHE wants to consider itself as another setting for their practices, research, and ideas because of what these professionals do offer to the overall body of knowledge in higher education. The goal for the journal is a simple one, to be a recognized repository of excellence through the publication of articles that give a voice to the different sectors within higher education.

References:
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This issue presents some of the changes to the journal that we will be implementing during this year. We have been listening to feedback from contributors and readers alike and are making changes based on what contributors and readers want to see as soon as it is practical. For example, this issue provides a new look and articles that are longer in length than before to provide more in-depth coverage of the issues raised by the authors’ research. The author guidelines have been revised to reflect the longer word limit for articles we will accept for review and publication. You will also note the inclusion of an editorial informing the readership of issues of concern or interest to the editorial team regarding the journal and higher education quality in general. We will continue to publish editorials as developments in higher education quality warrant or when noted scholars in the field feel they want to inform our readership about a particular concern, issue, or significant research that is worth all of our attention.

—The Editorial Team

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