Quality Teaching: It's Importance in Higher Education- A Conceptual View

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Abstract

The success of higher education is always a matter of concern, both for the general people and academicians. It is the stepping stone where by lies the foundation for a better individual development along with its productive contribution towards the society. The entire proceedings depend on the qualitative classroom interaction that takes place between the teachers and students which as a whole depends on the quality teaching on the part of teachers.

Quality teaching has become an issue of importance as the landscape of higher education has been facing continuous changes: increased international competition, increasing social and geographical diversity of the student body, increasing demands of value for money, introduction of information technologies, etc. But quality teaching lacks a clear definition, because quality can be regarded as an outcome or a property, or even a process, and because conceptions of teaching quality happen to be stakeholder relative. However, there is much debate in the literature on the methods that should be used to assess the level of teaching and its hypothetical improvements. The choice of teaching and learning method, for teachers and for students, influences the teaching and learning processes. What is tested determines what gets learnt, and how it is tested impacts how it is learnt. Assessment does not only inform students about their achievement, assessment in itself is a prerequisite for quality learning. Assessment drives learning (Chalmers, 2007). Quality teaching initiatives are very diverse both in nature and in function. This paper being qualitative and conceptual in nature shall focus on quality teaching and its importance in higher education in an explanatory manner.

Key Words: Quality, teaching, quality teaching, higher education.

Introduction: Quality teaching has become an issue of importance as the landscape of higher education has been facing continuous changes. The student body has considerably expanded and diversified, both socially and geographically. New students call for new teaching methods. Modern technologies have entered the classroom, thus modifying the nature of the interactions between students and professors. The governments, the students

and their families, the employers, the funds providers increasingly demand value for their money and desire more efficiency through teaching.

Quality teaching lacks clear definitions and to some extent can't be disconnected from debates on quality or quality culture in higher education that remains a controversial term. Some scholars regard quality primarily as an outcome, others as a property. Some consider teaching as the never ending process of reduction of defects and so quality teaching can never be totally grasped and appraised. Studies stresses that "good teachers" have empathy for students, they are generally experienced teachers and most of all they are organized and expressive. "Excellent teachers" are those who have passions: passion for learning, for their field, for teaching and for their students. But research also demonstrates that "good teaching" depends on what is being taught and on other situational factors.

Quality teaching is necessarily student-centered; its aim is most and for all student learning. Thus, attention should be given not simply to the teacher's pedagogical skills, but also to the learning environment that must address the student's personal needs: students should know why they are working, should be able to relate to other students and to receive help if needed. Adequate support to staff and students (financial support, social and academic support, support to minority students, counseling services, etc) also improves learning outcomes. Learning communities – groups of students and/or teachers who learn collaboratively and build knowledge through intellectual interaction – are judged to enhance student learning by increasing students' and teachers' satisfaction.

Teaching is to be Enhanced: In order for student learning to be enhanced, the focus of quality teaching initiatives should not always be on the teacher. Rather it should encompass the whole institution and the learning environment. Quality teaching initiatives are very diverse both in nature and in function. Some of these initiatives are undertaken at teacher's level, others at departmental, institutional or country level. Some quality initiatives aim to improve pedagogical methods while others address the global environment of student learning. Some are top-down process, other induce grass-root changes.

The most currently used quality initiatives seem to aim to enhance teamwork between teachers, goal-setting and course plans. However scholars have developed holistic theoretical models of how quality teaching initiatives should unfold. Gathering information and reading the literature – looking outside the classroom – are important tools to improve quality teaching, but they are still under-employed.

As globalization continues, the national and international competition for the best students is likely to increase among higher education institutions, thus only reinforcing pressure for quality teaching and quality assurance. It is likely that international rankings based on the quality of teaching will be set forth, thus reinforcing the attractiveness of quality initiatives. Moreover, there are more and more students who study at various universities, benefitting from opportunities like scholarships. These students are likely to compare the quality of the teaching received at these different institutions.

Statement of the Problem: The student body itself has changed considerably since the 1960s, hence modifying expectations regarding teaching. To begin with, in most developed countries, increasing social diversity has transformed the student body at university level. Higher education is no longer reserved to the elite. Next, the internet has globalized the market place, and institutions are increasingly competing for the best students, nationally and internationally. Many professors are now teaching international students, and consequently must develop new pedagogical strategies.

Teaching methods have also evolved. Professors who wish to incorporate aspects of on-line learning need to become familiar with new pedagogical methods. Distance education in print form is being supplemented by Internet – based delivery. Mixed modes of learning have become common: the majority of cross-border distance programmes now involve some form of face-to-face pedagogical or administrative contact, sometimes visits to study centres. Generally people in remote locations and working adults are the first to experience these new forms of learning.

Last, lifelong learning now offers a second chance to those who did not attain higher education or to those for whom the knowledge and skills acquired in school are no longer sufficient for a professional career spanning three or four decades (Marginson, Van der Wende, 2007). For instance, the European Union adopted in October 2006 a Communication entitled "It's never too late to learn", which claims that lifelong learning is at the heart of the ambitious Lisbon 2010-process (Marginson, Van der Wende, 2007). Higher education has changed in the past twenty years- the number of students has dramatically increased, funding concerns have changed, and the student body has diversified. The current "knowledge era" has reintroduced transfer of knowledge as a major contributor to growth and business success.

A generation of new teachers will soon come in to replace the baby boomers when the later retire. These new teachers will have grown up with the Internet and will have a renewed vision of what good teaching is. A possible change is that the faculty might come to adopt a more integrated professional identity, through for instance the reconceptualization of the relationship between teaching, learning and research (Bauer & Henkel, 1997).

Because of all these changes, several questions have received increased attention such as: what constitutes "good" and appropriate teaching? How can a "quality culture" in higher education that supports quality teaching be defined and achieved? Thus the present paper deals with the problem that is stated as *'Quality teaching: its importance in higher education'*

Defining Quality Teaching: The definition of Quality Teaching depends on the meaning one chooses to give to the concept of quality. "Quality" is indeed a multi-layered and complex word. As Biggs (2001) points out, "quality" can alternatively define an outcome, a property, or a process. Therefore it is hardly surprising that the phrase "Quality Teaching" has been given several definitions.

Competing definitions of quality: Harvey and Green (1993) distinguish four definitions of quality that can help us to understand what Quality Teaching might be. First, quality as **'*excellence*'**- the traditional conception of quality- is the dominant one in many old elite higher education institutions. Second, quality can be defined as **'*value for money*'**- a quality institution in this view is one that satisfies the demands of public accountability. Third, quality may be seen as **'*fitness for purpose*'**- the purpose being that of the institution, for instance getting students to learn sciences efficiently. The last definition listed by Harvey & Green is that of quality as **'*transforming*'**. According to this definition, Quality Teaching is teaching that transforms student's perceptions and the way they go about applying their knowledge to real world problems.

Quality Teaching is 'stakeholder relative': Another difficulty when it comes to defining 'quality',- and hence 'Quality Teaching' is that, as noticed by Harvey et al. (1992), there are many ways to define quality in higher education because definitions of quality are 'stakeholder relative' −'stakeholders' including students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, government and funding agencies, creditors, auditors, assessors, and the community at large. Tam (2001) also found that all stakeholders held their own view of what quality in education means to them.

The question of the student's perception of quality in higher education has received considerable attention. The concept of the student as a customer was first mooted in the UK by Crawford (1991). Consumerism emphasizes five principles: access, choice, information, redress, representation (Potter 1988, Sanderson 1992), all five of which may be taken into account by the student as he/she is evaluating the quality of higher education institutions. But Dickson et al. (1995) points out that 'education may be unique in the sense that it is difficult for the customer to assess the quality and relevance of the service'. (p. 63).

Who is a 'good' teacher?

Enabling teaching in Higher Education: The role and status accorded to teachers is being reassessed as external demands for quality increase. Indeed, it is easy to understand that the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. In his landmark study, Boyer (1990) asserted that teaching should be accorded a higher status and should assume a specialized role. What it takes to be a "good" teacher: Sensitivity to class level and progress, empathy with students...

Quality teaching and learning: Taylor (2003) lists thirteen abilities needed for Quality Teaching and learning. These capabilities do not only encompass traditional discipline and pedagogical knowledge and skills. They also entail an understanding of the global and connected nature of education and skills in leadership and management.

Fig 1:

Engagement globally and locally
Engagement with learners
Equity and pathways
Engagement with peers and colleagues
Designing for learning
Leadership
Entrepreneurship
Personal management
Reflective practice
professional development
Teaching for learning
Management of teaching and learning
Evaluation of teaching and learning
Assessing for learning

The two pillars of good teaching: Organization and expressiveness:

According to Feldman, (1989) and Murray, (1991) two qualities are highly correlated with student achievement: expressiveness and even more significantly, organization.

Good organization of subject matter and planning of the course are important to student learning (Kallisson 1986). Well-structured presentations, lecture-outlines, headings, subheading, and syllabi enhance students learning experiences (Feldman 1989, Murray 1991). Indeed, outlines transfer knowledge structure. They can serve as an advance organizer providing students with chunking strategies (Perry and Magnusson 1989) thus contributing to more efficient learning.

Expressiveness, sometimes referred to as 'enthusiasm' – but also encompassing the use of eye contact, appropriate physical movement and change in tone when important material is presented – also has great impact on student learning.

The recruitment of good teachers: A challenge: It is obvious that 'the issue of teacher quality is inextricably linked to recruitment, for in recruiting teachers [institutions] wish to attract individuals who are well prepared, effective and who will remain in the teaching profession long enough to make a difference.' (Darling Hammond, Berry, Haselkorn and Fideler, 1999). Darling & al. point out that the issue of supply of teachers is not a question of numbers – most States could lower their standards to fill the classrooms- but one of quality. In particular, finding good professors to teach in poor and high minority zones is a

dwelling task. Though Darling & al.'s studies concern secondary education, a parallel could be drawn to higher education.

Hirsch (2001) offers a panel of solutions to improve the quality of teachers recruited at higher educational level, one solution being salary increase. However there is no consensus to date among scholars that increasing the salary of teacher recruits improves teaching quality.

Adopting a learning-centered approach: As universities are developing an increasing student-centered focus, learning communities have moved in the spotlight of many universities attention. Learning communities commonly refer to all types of 'groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning' (Cross, 1998).
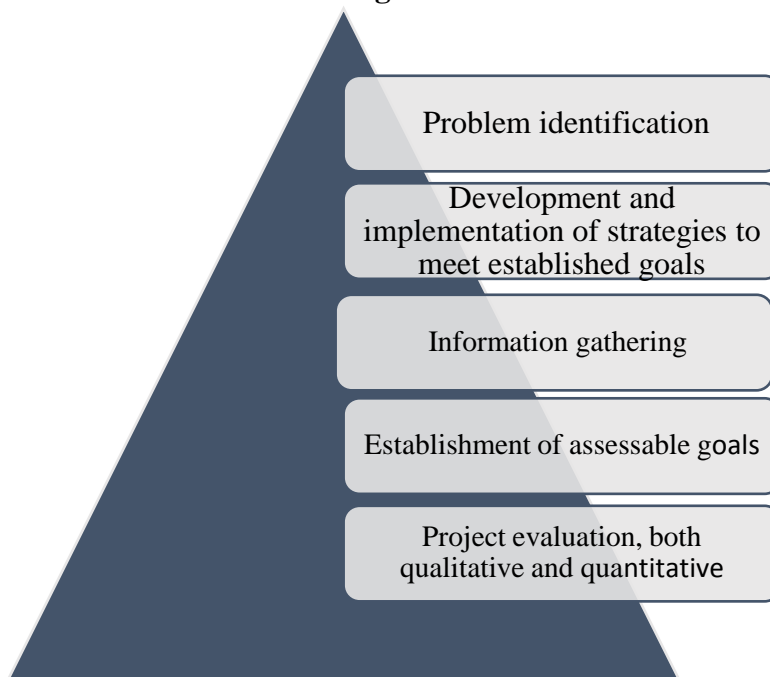
Cross (1998) believes that interest in learning communities is skyrocketing for three main reasons. First, *a philosophical reason*: Our conception of knowledge is changing. The idea of collaborative learning corresponds to a new belief that knowledge is built by learners: 'The fundamental assumption of constructivism is that knowledge is actively built by learners as they shape and build mental frameworks to make sense of their environment'. (Cross, 1998)

Second, *a research-based reason*: Research tells us that students who engage with professors are better, and more satisfied learners. Students who 'have more frequent contacts with faculty members in and out of class during college years are more satisfied with their educational experiences, less likely to drop out, and perceive themselves to have learned more than students who have less faculty contact'(Cross, 1998). Third, learning communities are increasingly used for a *pragmatic reason*: By participating in learning communities, students learn about group dynamics. They learn how to behave constructively. Learning communities 'train people effectively for the workplace and educate them for good citizenship' (Cross, 1998).

Quality teaching initiatives are diverse both in nature and in function, to say the least. Some spring from a top-down initiative, others start at a grass-root level; some are centered on pedagogical methods, others on quality environments in higher education institutions; some concern only a couple teachers, others the whole university. Some promote team work, others improve the learning environment of the student.
Moreover, Quality Teaching initiatives are also shaped by the intrinsic profile of the institution which operates in a specific regional or national context (e.g. a remote vocational-teaching intensive university might support quality teaching differently from a world renowned research-intensive one).

A five step guide to carry out a successful quality teaching initiative:

Fig 1.1:

- Problem identification
- Development and implementation of strategies to meet established goals
- Information gathering
- Establishment of assessable goals
- Project evaluation, both qualitative and quantitative

a) Problem identification: The professor must reflect on the weaknesses of his teaching
b) Information Gathering: The professor must read literature, attend workshops, and work with mentors or student associates
c) Establishment of assessable goals: The professor must choose a specific project to work on
d) Development and Implementation of strategies to meet established goals
e) Project evaluation, both qualitative and quantitative.

Enhancing the quality of learning by improving the learning environment: In addition to the quality of the lecture, quality teaching requires that attention be given to the 'Personal learning environment' (Ellet, Loup, Culross, McMullen and Rugutt, 1997) of students. Indeed, learning is enhanced for students in higher education settings that address students personal learning environment needs. Good environment for learning is defined, among other characteristics, as follows:

➢ Students have knowledge of the goals of the class
➢ Students know what work must be done for the class
➢ Students perceive the teacher to be fair, the pace to be good
➢ Students participate in-class
➢ Students relate to other students
➢ Students can receive help from the teacher if needed
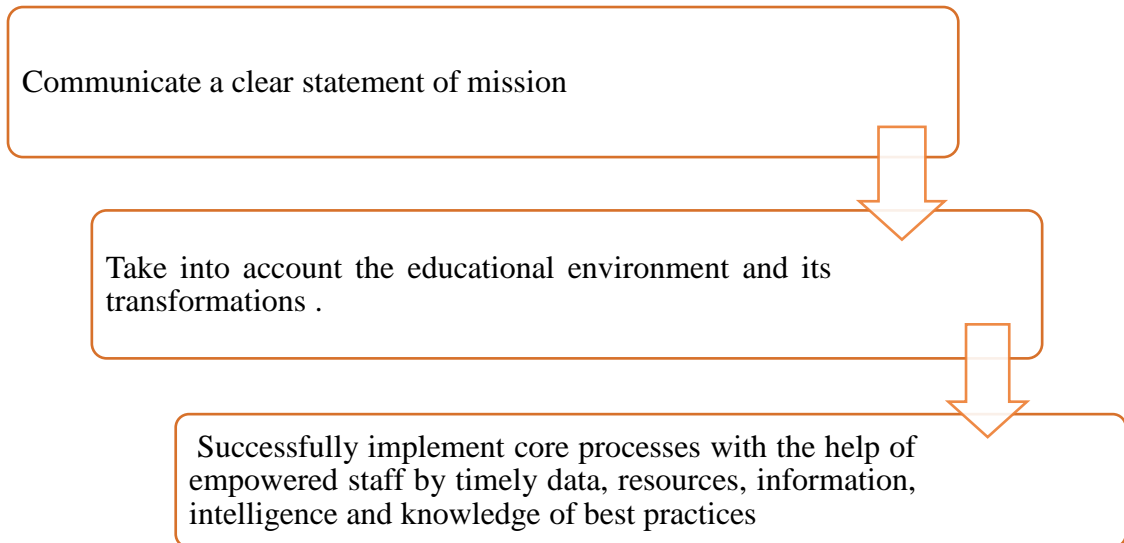
> ➢ Diversity can enhance quality learning

Many services offered by the universities considerably affect the quality of the teaching. With adequate support to staff and students, teachers teach better and students learn better (Chalmers, 2007). These services include:

> ➢ Student financial support
> ➢ Financial scholarships for underrepresented / disadvantaged groups of students
> ➢ Student educational/academic support
> ➢ Student social support, transition programs
> ➢ specifically for minority students
> ➢ Guidance/ counseling services
> ➢ Staff development programs
> ➢ The provision of advice and support for the interpretation of feedback/evaluation data.

Fostering quality management at institutional level: The essential part played by the university and its administration in creating a quality culture is several-folded. Quality teaching initiatives are more likely to be successful in an environment in which quality is highly valued. The university's organizational culture should be that of continuous improvement through teamwork; the university must define a mission statement and implement it to take to achieve quality culture:

> ❖ Develop a vision and a strategy
> ❖ Establish a sense of necessity, explain why a quality culture is needed
> ❖ Create a guiding coalition: form an empowered team to lead developments
> ❖ Communicate widely and continually
> ❖ Be prepared to listen
> ❖ Develop a shared commitment - balance purposeful and cohesive advance with tolerance for dissent and new ideas (Beatty and Ulrich, 1991)
> ❖ Generate some early successes
> ❖ Consolidate and embed the gains
> ❖ Don't rest on laurels

Alignment between policy and management directives, faculty strategic initiatives and teaching and learning practices is the key to effective quality improvement (Barrie & Prosser, 2002). Osseo Asare, Long bottom and Chourides conclude that managerial leadership and quality teaching in higher education can only be achieved if the universities respect these **three steps:**

Fig 1.2 :

Communicate a clear statement of mission

Take into account the educational environment and its transformations .

Successfully implement core processes with the help of empowered staff by timely data, resources, information, intelligence and knowledge of best practices

Assessing the impact of Quality Teaching processes is a difficult task: In recent years, attention is shifted from design and implementation of quality assurance systems to their use and usefulness. But, because quality assurance mechanisms take place in complex organizations in which many changes happen at the same time, it is difficult to ascribe effects unambiguously to a single cause such as the quality assurance schemes (Stensaker, 2004).

Does Quality Teaching lead students to learn better?

Research increasingly addresses the impact of quality teaching initiatives. Using the assumption that Quality Teaching leads students to learn better, Marton and Säljö (1976) found that students learning approaches are of two sorts, ***the deep approach*** which focuses on understanding the course material, and ***the surface approach*** which focuses on memorizing the material itself. Barrie, Ginns & Prosser (2005) found that students who perceive that the quality of their teaching is good will tend to adopt a 'deep' approach to learning, a coherent and integrated understanding of the course. Student learning is enhanced in higher education settings that address students personal learning environment needs and in which Quality Teaching thrives.

Conclusion: Quality assurance is an essential element of all quality enhancement initiatives. In order to evaluate which mechanism really improves the quality of the teacher, one must assess the level of teaching before the launching of the enhancement initiative. Once the programme is well started the quality of teaching must again be meaningful. And for such an initiative to be truly effective the level of teaching must continue to be assessed very regularly. If lecturers believe that the students cannot be fair judges of the quality of their teaching, then they are less likely to follow up and change their practices. Teachers

who follow up on quality assurance schemes are those who follow up on quality assurance schemes have control over the quality of education received.

Assessing the results of quality teaching initiatives has proven to be difficult, and this issue has received increasing attention in the literature. Many researchers now address the numerous paradoxes that the measurement of quality sometimes induces. For instance, a well-rated programme or a rewarded teacher feels less incentive for change and becomes therefore more likely to maintain the status quo. Teachers who follow-up on quality assurance schemes are also those who believe that it is in their power to improve student learning. Last, most teachers will try to improve the quality of their teaching only if they believe that the university cares about teaching. Hence, if an institution wants its teaching to be of good quality, it must give concrete, tangible signs that teaching matters.

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