Quality Monitoring, Innovation and Transformative Learning

MIKE CORDER, MARGARET HORSBURGH & MARY MELROSE
Auckland Institute of Technology, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1020, New Zealand

ABSTRACT  This article examines some of the issues identified during the initial research stages of a New Zealand longitudinal study which is examining the extent to which external and internal quality monitoring impact on the student experience of learning. A major issue to emerge is the adequacy or appropriateness of general notions of quality in the context of higher education. While definitions of quality based on dimensions such as high standards, zero defects and value for money are relevant to higher education, they do not encompass directly the core activities of teaching and learning. The concept of quality as transformation is explored, and the links between transformative learning and innovation considered. It is concluded that monitoring the effectiveness of higher education in a rapidly changing world, requires focus on the transformative processes of learning/teaching, and the fostering of innovation.

Context

As in other Western economies, New Zealand in the mid-1970s and 1980s began a process of societal reform. No longer were market economies able to support the full cost of a rapid expansion in higher education in the face of competing demands such as health and social welfare. Governments were faced with monitoring a very diverse and expanding higher education sector constrained by a shrinking resource (Kells, 1992; Harvey & Knight, 1996). Economic recession, decline and governmental fiscal restraint inevitably led to a questioning of the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education. ‘Quality’ moved from a somewhat peripheral concern to have a central focus in the assessment of ‘accountability’ of higher education institutions. Efficiency and effectiveness are now very clearly linked to accountability and pervade perceptions of ‘quality’. Paradoxically, the New Zealand Government expect innovation, they require ‘education to be flexible enough to respond rapidly to the needs of individuals, society and the economy’ (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 40), yet demand accountability through controls, or in the guise of quality monitoring which do little to enhance education.

Questions are now asked about just what impact quality monitoring in this accountability-led environment is having on the core activities of education, learning and teaching. A study has begun to determine to what extent quality monitoring does impact on the student experience of learning.
For the purposes of the study, quality monitoring is defined as the broad set of quality-related activities or evaluations which occur, either external or internal to the educational organisation. The initial stages of the study have provided some ideas on transformative learning, the links between transformation and innovation, and how quality monitoring might provide a focus for transformation. These are discussed.

**Perceptions of Quality**

The Quality in a Higher Education project based in Birmingham found that there are widely differing conceptualisations of quality in education (Harvey, 1994). Five broad definitions of quality are described (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Firstly, quality of education can be viewed as exceptionally high standards. For example, the high standards associated with educational institutions such as Oxford or Cambridge Universities, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Tokyo University (Tokyo Daigaku). Sometimes these standards may be measured and sometimes they are taken for granted.

Secondly, quality can be perceived as consistency. In other words, is there consistent conformity to a defined educational standard or standards? This approach may be relevant to the production of a product with zero defects, but there are clear limitations in education given that the standards of performance (learning outcomes) are achieved by students.

The third definition is based on the idea of fitness of purpose. The operationalisation of this approach requires a clear definition of ‘fitness’ and ‘purpose’ from the viewpoint of the relevant stakeholders (e.g. students, employers). A major issue is who should define the purpose?

Fourthly, quality may be interpreted as value for money. For example, a government measure of the quality of educational institutional efficiency may be the cost per equivalent full-time student (EFTS).

The final definition involves regarding education as a transformative process in which the student is an active participant rather than a passive receiver. In short, the educational process may transform by enhancing and empowering the student. Enhancement is reflected in the addition of knowledge and skills. Empowerment involves ‘the development of students’ critical ability, that is, their ability to think and act in a way that transcends taken-for-granted preconceptions, prejudices and frames of reference.... At its core, transformation, in an educational sense, refers to the evolution of the way students approach the acquisition of knowledge and skills and relate them to a wider context’ (Harvey et al., 1997, p. 4). If achieving quality in higher education requires a focus on developing transformative graduates, then the total learning environment is important. ‘Quality’ needs to be understood as a transformative process, it cannot be separated from learning, teaching and assessment, institutional practices and structures, within the context of the institutional, departmental and faculty culture and climate.

While it is not suggested that the five definitions of quality are in any sense mutually exclusive, the absence of the dimension of transformation from the
current quality monitoring focus in higher education is seen to be a major omission. In support of this Harvey and Knight argue that transformation is a ‘meta-quality’ concept and the other aspects of quality (exceptional standards, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money) are ‘possible operationalizations of the transformative process rather than ends in themselves’ (Harvey & Knight, 1996, p. 14).

The term ‘transformation’ signifies a change from one state to another and in the context of higher education, this change may provide a variety of opportunities at the individual student level. Individual transformation may include, for example, moving from a state of being unemployed to one of effective employment in a chosen trade or profession, developing the capacity to move from one occupation to another, transformation that facilitates breaking through gender, ethnic and other vocational barriers, or moving from a state of passivity to active participation in organisational or community affairs and change. While some of these transformations may be regarded as utilitarian in an economic sense, they nevertheless have important consequences for the life chances of the individuals involved as a member of the workforce, and of society in general.

The need for educational transformation is reflected in the New Zealand Government’s Ministry of Education’s view that there is a national need for ‘appropriately skilled and adaptable people who are encouraged, supported and recognised in their efforts to undertake life-long learning so that they participate effectively in a changing society’ (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 30). This is not, however, reflected in the emphasis the Government has placed on quality monitoring.

A recent UK study (Harvey et al., 1997) of the attributes necessary for graduates in the 21st century, confirms that ‘quality’ graduates have transformative attributes. Employers are seeking graduates with the capacity to be adaptive, adaptable and transformative. To be adaptive graduates must be able to fit into the workplace, work in teams, exhibit good interpersonal skills, communicate well, take on responsibility for an area of work, and perform efficiently and effectively. Adaptable graduates use their own initiative to develop new ideas, and persuade others to accept and develop their own ideas. Additionally the transformative graduate will innovate, inspire others, anticipate and lead changes.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning involves cognitive or intellectual change and transformation of the person. Transformation is about the student as a participant in his or her learning process, where he or she is both enhanced through the knowledge, skills and abilities they acquire, and also empowered. Abilities which enable a person to think critically and reflect, to cope with change, to question and challenge, all contribute to empowerment (Harvey & Knight, 1996).

For transformative cognitive change to occur, a learning environment conducive to deep learning is needed, where the student has metacognitive awareness of
strategies necessary to use a deep approach to the learning ‘tasks’ they are set (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Characteristics of deep learning include the intention to transform ideas or information by understanding them for oneself (Biggs, 1989). Deep learning involves relating ideas to knowledge and experience, looking for patterns and meanings, considering evidence and conclusions, and in the process critically considering arguments (Entwistle, 1994). Deep approaches to learning contribute to transformation, but alone would not be enough for transformation. Cognitive transformation requires a learning process which includes both assimilation, where new information is added into existing mental structures, and accommodation, where base ideas are changed in response to new information. There is also a need to provide opportunities for the person to be transformed. The possession by individuals of intellectual skills and knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition for control of learning and effective action. In addition, the individuals must act in an effortful goal-directed manner and have the belief that they can accomplish the tasks required to achieve the goals. The active and purposeful participation of students in the learning process is therefore paramount and belies any view of higher education as the delivery of learning to passive recipients.

Given that many full-time students enter higher education directly from secondary schools, a major question is can higher education contribute to the personal development which is such an important component of transformation, or does this happen largely as the result of maturation? In response to this question Harvey and Knight conclude:

There appear to be small, positive effects on self-esteem; a reduction in authoritarian, dogmatic and ethnocentric thinking; greater personal adjustment and psychological well-being; an enhanced belief that one has control over one’s fate; an increase in the complexity and reflectiveness of students’ thinking. ... In sum, there is North American evidence that higher education is associated with changes in students that are additional to those changes that occur through the natural processes of growing up. (Harvey & Knight, 1996, p. 13)

Harvey and Knight (1996) also point to three additional factors which contribute to personal development. Firstly, the effects of attending college are greater than variations between students attending different colleges. Secondly, the extent of the effects is largely determined by the individual student. Thirdly, a significant influence on the non-cognitive effects appears to be the ‘organization and interpersonal climate of the department’ and ‘orientation programmes for new students, by means of which expectations may be appropriately shaped’ (Harvey & Knight, 1996, pp. 13–14).

If transformative learning is accepted as the primary focus of higher education then quality monitoring may have to change its focus. Transformation needs innovative approaches to learning and teaching. There is little evidence (Rear, 1994) anywhere in the world that quality monitoring and innovation in teaching and learning are pulling in the same direction.
There are some parallels in New Zealand business. It can be argued that transformation is an ongoing feature of private and public sector business organisations in New Zealand as a result of factors such as deregulation of the economy, privatisation of former public-sector organisations, and changes to employment law. Campbell-Hunt and Corbett (1996) explain 'in every aspect of organisational practice, and in every sector and size of firm, we have found evidence of substantial changes that have taken New Zealand enterprise away from its legacy of control, and towards the new realities of dynamic and competitive markets' (Campbell-Hunt & Corbett, 1996, p. 129).

Campbell-Hunt and Corbett, however, conclude that only a small number of New Zealand firms are 'effectively pursuing the strategies of sustainable competitive advantage' (1996, p. 132). They go on to state that 'more innovative firms are most distinguished from the rest in seeking feedback from staff on plans, in empowering staff to implement their own ideas, and in the importance they attach to culture as a basis for innovation' (Campbell-Hunt & Corbett, 1996, p. 133).

It is important to understand what we mean by innovation. Henry draws a distinction between creativity and innovation. In her view 'creativity is about the quality of originality that leads to new ways of seeing and novel ideas' (Henry, 1991, p. 3). In contrast, innovation is 'the process whereby creative ideas are developed into something tangible, like a new product or practice' (Henry, 1991, p. 3). Expressed another way by Whitfield (1975, cited by Henry), creators generate the ideas, innovators convert the idea into something tangible, and entrepreneurs or intrapreneurs (entrepreneurs within organisations) implement the ideas by putting them into practice. Henry describes creative people as having:

... highlighted traits such as tolerance for ambiguity, independent thinking, not being inhibited by conformity pressures, good verbal communication skills, imagination, and a reasonable but not outstanding level of intelligence. Creative people are intrinsically motivated and work hard. (Henry, 1991, p. 6)

A major point is that the traits of creative people correspond broadly to the outcomes of transformative learning described earlier in the article. If teaching staff, programme managers, curriculum developers, and institutional managers are to contribute effectively to innovation at least some of them require these creative traits. This is not to suggest that everyone has to be creative because valuable contributions can be made by people in the roles of innovators or intrapreneurs. In fact creative ideas without appropriate implementation cannot be classed as effective innovation.

Clearly if improvement of transformative learning processes are to be facilitated then an institution has to empower staff, especially teaching staff, to provide the freedom necessary to question the status quo and to seek alternative and innovative ways of providing such learning (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Whilst accepting this there is, however, a need to recognise that what is seen as 'improvement' by one
stakeholder group may not be perceived as such by other stakeholders. For example, the introduction of innovative learning contracts to facilitate deep learning may be regarded by students as the abrogation of responsibility on the part of teaching staff.

The emphasis for quality monitoring in New Zealand has been largely on demonstrating accountability through quality management systems and performance indicators (Horsburgh, 1997). While recognising the need for higher education institutes to be accountable, it is not apparent how this prescribed approach to monitoring actually enhances innovation or the core activities of teaching and learning.

Harvey and Knight (1996) believe that when academics are faced with very prescribed monitoring systems they simply comply in order to minimise disruption to their existing practices. While there may be some initial impetus to change, when academics are required to report in particular ways there is little sustained improvement. A further danger is that ‘adherence to the rules, originally conceived as a means becomes transformed into an end in itself’ (Merton, 1957, p. 365), or the rules are applied inappropriately, or are no longer applicable because conditions have changed.

However, proponents of the accountability-led approach to quality monitoring argue that without the pressure of external monitoring processes, it is unlikely that any substantial and rapid innovation will take place in higher education, given what is described as the conservatism embedded in academic autonomy. Harvey and Knight (1996) take an opposing view and suggest that a more likely outcome is a compliance culture, with no long-term impact on quality improvement and innovation. Other authors agree, but acknowledge that governments and external agencies may not recognise that educational institutions have the capacity to improve themselves (Barth, 1990), while Garvin (1993) acknowledging that accountability is required, is clear that it must not stifle staff innovation.

Conclusions

The role of quality monitoring in higher education is questionable at present in the sense that what is being assessed is not the core activity of teaching and learning. Moreover, the focus of current quality monitoring is on compliance rather than on fostering innovation. If transformative learning is perceived as the central theme of quality monitoring, the emphasis must become the enhancement of educational opportunities that ‘enable the process of student learning and the acquisition of transformative abilities’ (Harvey & Knight, 1996, p. 22).

Donald (1997), Harvey and Knight (1996), Honan (1996) and Kells (1992) all provide commentary on emphases that need to be in place if institutions are to achieve enhancement of learning. A compilation of these ideas provides a useful conclusion:

- develop graduate profiles which include broad generic attributes, and put in place strategies which will facilitate transformative skills;
• delegate responsibility for quality to effective units that are able to foster improvement at the level of the staff:student interface;
• encourage teaching units to define improvement and put in place processes needed to foster and implement improvement;
• emphasise the place of feedback from students on their whole environment;
• ensure that monitoring leads to effective action and appropriate change;
• recognise and reward innovation;
• link teacher appraisal and professional development;
• facilitate professional development that is transformative;
• include regular internal cycles of self-review across all areas of the institute that relate to learning and the total experience of students;
• encourage and facilitate team work and active participation of staff in a wide range of institute-wide activities; and
• link quality and innovation into budgets.

It is intended that these ideas and others which emerge from the study will be developed into overall principles for quality monitoring. The study is due for completion late 1998.

References

BARTH, R.S. (1990) Schools from Within: teachers, parents and principals can make the difference (San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass).


