Quality as Transformation: Educational Metamorphosis

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Introduction

Quality as transformation is a main theme of quality enhancement in the UK higher education sector (QAA, 2009). It emphasises student-centered learning and encourages students to take a leading role in assuring the quality of their own education (Harvey, 2006). Quality as transformation is closely related to the notion of ‘transformative learning’, which grows out of a confluence of post-60s radicalism and critical pedagogical theories (Giroux, 2001), and an interest in adult education as part of social welfare (Mezirow, 1990, 2000).

Students are expected to not only engage with knowledge but also develop their capacity to understand and question existing ideas and assumptions that inform their experiences and understandings of society (Herod, 2002).

Harvey and Knight (1996) developed the concept of transformative learning by arguing that quality could be transformation. Harvey (2009) interpreted transformation as more than a significant cognitive change towards a more rational frame of thinking as Mezirow suggested, but as a continuing process of students becoming more confident, challenging assumptions, developing new understandings and acting upon them. The change in conceptualisation was described as either an accumulation of meaning transformation, or a disorienting dilemma, triggered by a life crisis or major life transition.

Transformation has been perceived as the most appropriate definition of quality in higher education. For example, Srikanthan & Dalrymple (2003) argued that it could address the concerns of all stakeholder groups. However, both transformation and quality are elusive terms. They are subjected to different interpretations. For example, the academic community tends to see quality as external, alien and separate from their work (Barnett, 2003). Quality is perceived as power (Morley, 2003), and as bureaucratisation, impression management and conformity (Newton, 2002). By contrast, students are more pragmatic and understand quality as leading to them being able to ‘pass exams’ rather than as transformation of their thinking processes (Cheng, 2011).

Despite academics’ lack of enthusiasm for embracing quality as a management idea, quality has been seen and used by the Government as a tool for addressing issues of teaching and learning in higher education (Harvey & Askling 2003). Quality was regarded as meeting the expectations of customers (DfES, 2003). It has been used to evaluate teaching performance and the provision of learning resources. Moreover, rising fees produce a challenge for universities in delivering quality as ‘value for money’ (Molesworth et al, 2009). This has led to an impression that quality is essentially pragmatic and outcome-driven.

One explanation for these different interpretations is that understanding of what quality means is originally derived from business and industry, so it triggers discussion within academia about its applicability to higher education (Owlia & Aspinwall 1996). Another explanation is that the complexity of higher education increases the difficulty in conceptualising quality. For example, its different component parts, like teaching and research, will have different requirements for quality (Sahney et al, 2004). Despite the complexity and difficulties in understanding the concepts of quality, quality as transformation has become the main agenda in the current quality enhancement process in the UK.

However, very little research has examined the relationship between quality and transformation. There is little indication of how quality can be equated to transformation during the learning process. This research addresses the gap in the literature and explores how to understand quality as transformation, and how quality and transformation are perceived as interrelated at doctoral level education. The complexity of the learning process (Barnett, 2007) will be considered, as learning has different dimensions which relate to...
different notions of quality and transformation. These learning dimensions include: the learning of knowledge and skills, the emotions and motivation, and social communication and cooperation (Illeris, 2004). Another reason is that learners, especially undergraduates, may be unaware that they are going through a process of transformation, until after the actual transformation has taken place. By contrast, doctoral students are mature learners who are more capable of reflecting on and interpreting their transformative learning experience than undergraduates (Fenge, 2012).

**Understandings of transformation**

This paper considers that various approaches have been adopted to conceptualise transformation. They include: Freire’s (2000) view of social transformation; Jack Mezirow’s (1990, 1991, 2000) notion of rational and psychocritical transformation; Daloz’s (1986; 1999) approach of developmental transformation; Dirkx’s (1998) linking transformation with spirituality; and a neurobiological perspective of transformation by Janik (2005; 2007). Believing that education was for the purpose of liberation, Freire argued that if empowered by new perspectives, people could act upon them to transform their world into a more equitable place to live. Sharing the notions of emancipatory education, Mezirow (1991; 1996; 2000) interpreted transformation as a process of individualisation and a lifelong journey of understanding oneself. Rational thought, reflection, emotion and social context are the key factors to achieving transformation (Mezirow, 2000). Daloz (1986; 1999) suggested a developmental approach to foster transformation. He believed that education could help students to make sense of their lives, because they could learn to negotiate developmental transitions and become changed in the process. Dirkx (1998) related transformation to imagination in that it would lead to a deeper self-understanding and mindfulness. Janik (2005; 2007) proposed neurobiological transformation. His approach explains that transformation: requires discomfort before discovery; is rooted in and strengthened by students’ experiences, needs, and interests; and demands that educators understand the knowledge base of neurobiological systems.

Depending on the emphasis on individual or social change, the above views can be classified as personal and emancipatory transformation. The neurobiological and psychocritical perspectives focus on individual change, and little is considered of context and social change and their relationship to transformation. By contrast, social, developmental, and cultural-spiritual transformations are emancipatory, given that they consider social change and see the individual and society as one.

**Promoting transformation**

Transformation has been promoted through developing transformative learning in the international higher education sector (Lange, 2004; Fetherston & Kelly, 2007; and Canton & Wright, 2008). The essential conditions and techniques for transformative learning to take place have been extensively researched. For example, Cranton (2000; 2006) revealed that transformative learning could be uncomfortable and complex because academics were not trained educators and students might not have the skills required for reflection. Berger (2004) explained that it was because transformative learning involved the development of an acute awareness of students' attitudes, personalities and preferences over time. Cranton recommended that providing opportunities for students to articulate their assumptions and recognising their learning styles would help students critically question their perspectives and then revise and act upon them.

However, there were criticisms on the limitations of transformative learning. They include the argument that transformative learning is too narrowly connected with the formal field of adult education (King, 2004), and is mainly concerned with the rational process of learning (Dirkx, 1998), ignoring the psychological drives and the role of intuitive and emotional processes.
(Boyd & Myers, 1988; Taylor, 1998). Ball (1999) pointed out that strong emotions instead of rationality often accompany students’ transformation. According to Moore (2005), academics express their difficulty in embracing transformative learning in practice. One reason is that it could take place only when students are mentally and emotionally ready, and when the institutions are able to foster and nurture these transformative experiences. Another reason is that the complex nature of transformative learning (Cranton, 1996) makes it hard for academics to know when students are ready to be transformed, and what they could transform students into. The third reason is that transformation is not designed to have a particular endpoint, but embedded with the purpose of empowerment and freedom of thought, so might be invisible during the learning process. In spite of the concerns with transformative learning, transformation has been related to the concept of quality in the UK quality enhancement process. Prompted by the consideration that little research has been carried out into how to apply quality as transformation to educational practices, this paper will analyse and interpret these concepts at PhD-level. It is based on the belief that doctoral students are more likely than other students to possess the meta-cognition to reflect on their own learning (Green & Macauley, 2007). Therefore, they are in a good position to identify and understand their own transformation.

**Research methods**

Two English universities were selected as research sites. The two institutions were chosen on the basis of their difference in research intensiveness. One institution is an ‘ancient’ world-renown university and the other is a pre-1992 institution, ie. it possessed university status before the enactment of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. An interpretative research design was employed to address two research questions:

1. How can quality as transformation be applied to PhD education?
2. How are ‘quality’ and ‘transformation’ interrelated at PhD level?

The interpretative approach (Holliday, 2002) enabled the researcher to consider in depth how PhD supervisors and PhD students understood quality and transformation. Supervisors were in a unique position to interpret the quality of PhD education, as they were able to observe and facilitate their students’ progress. PhD students could produce insider perspectives on transformation through reflecting on their own transformative experiences. There were two stages in the data collection. Stage one comprised semi-structured interviews with 16 PhD supervisors and 16 PhD students drawn from three disciplinary areas in the two universities - education, physics and engineering. The subject differences allowed both academic and practice-based dimensions of learning to be explored. A semi-structured interview was adopted because it is flexible and explores perspectives in depth (Denscombe, 2003). The researcher adapted the interview questions to suit the interviewees’ roles, and explored their understandings of quality and transformation. Stage two consisted of a follow-up workshop. Previous interviewees exchanged their views of quality and transformation by employing methods of collage making (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2009). This workshop stimulated different perspectives of quality and transformation using both words and images. Content analysis (McKee, 2001) was used to analyse the data. It assessed the importance of a particular idea, such as the meanings and dimensions of quality and transformation, by how frequently it appeared in the text. NVivo software was used to facilitate the coding of the qualitative data (Welsh, 2002). It maximised the extent to which the data could be analysed in a rigorous and transparent manner (Cresswell, 2006).

**Findings**

This research revealed that interviewees held different attitudes towards the concept of quality as transformation. University type appeared as a factor that had little influence on the attitudes. Two out of 32 interviewees did not perceive ‘quality as transformation’ as a
relevant model to doctoral education. They regarded higher education as an enabling process, instead of producing designated changes in learner states of knowing or being. Eight interviewees supported the idea of quality as transformation. Their argument was that if students had not been changed through the process of doing the PhD, then it was not a successful experience. They related quality as transformation to new information, knowledge and skills, the ‘right attitude’ to learn, and the capability to do research.

The other 22 interviewees believed that quality as transformation was a laudable ideal but they doubted its applicability to all subject areas especially, for example, engineering. They regarded the phrase as educational jargon. For example, one supervisor interviewee explained why it was mainly applied to educational studies:

I suppose it’s a trend or an approach in education to make an emphasis on the change of behaviour and attitudes in a learning process. (PhDS8)

There was perceived difficulty in applying quality as transformation to PhD education. Most interviewees expressed the belief that both quality and transformation could not be measured through identifying changes in students’ states of knowing or believing. For example, a student interviewee in education argued against the ‘quantification’ of quality by the frequency of supervision:

I suppose if one looks at the DPhil certainly you’d not just want to look at the quantification of the education you receive, um, you look at the quality. I don’t have to see my supervisor for two/three months, I’m happy with it, until I produce whatever product I want their comments on …. (PhDS10)

This comment suggests that while there is increasing emphasis on contact hours in higher education, at PhD level the extent of supervisor-supervisee contact does not necessarily equate with an increase in quality. More than half of the interviewees interpreted quality and transformation as different. One distinction was that transformation could be unplanned, while quality was normally related to indicators in practice or to expectations. Another difference was that quality and transformation could be two parallel processes. For example, a student interviewee pointed out that quality in the engineering discipline was closely related to standards and criteria, due to its concern for the quality of life and safety. But the concept of transformation was linked with the images of change and uncertainty. He therefore described quality and transformation as completely unrelated in engineering:

I think it’s possible that someone could have a really good quality learning experience … and not necessarily have a transformation. (PhD2)

The third perceived difference was that quality and transformation were related to different types of knowledge acquisition, either instrumental or emancipatory (Haberma, 1971). In other words, if quality is outcome-oriented, the call for quality is likely to lead to instrumental knowledge. This differs from the expectation that the call for students’ transformation would easily lead to emancipatory knowledge, because it would free learners from conforming to indicators and standards.

**Understanding quality**

In order to explore the relationship between quality and transformation, this research examined how interviewees interpreted these two concepts separately. It reveals that quality was described as abstract, personal, and dependent on the institutional ethos. Most interviewees from the ‘ancient’ world-renown university were satisfied with the quality of their PhD education. They equated quality to their university brand. They believed that the quality of learning would be guaranteed in a top university, because it was more likely to have more
learning resources than other less prestigious universities. Nearly all of the interviewees agreed on the complex nature of quality, which has been extensively discussed in previous research (Barnett, 2007; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). They emphasized their uncertainty about the purpose of quality and issues connected with who benefits from it. Eleven interviewees felt that there was no shared understanding as to what students were entitled to do to achieve quality in learning, and how they could support students to achieve that, as the standards of quality varied with institutions and supervisors. The managerial approach to assessing quality was described as a political game, because it might reduce the quality of PhD education, if it created a rigid structure for what could be done within the programmes. The concern of quality requirement corresponds closely with a view expressed by Harvey & Askling (2003), Morley (2003) and Newton (2002) that the concept of quality could become a control over academic work. This critical view of quality was strongly shared by interviewees, in particular, from the discipline of education.

In the collage-making workshop, participants used a variety of images to represent quality. The images of a razor and a tiger were frequently used to express their concern that the use of quality for management purpose might reduce the quality of PhD education (See Pictures 1 & 2). Despite the concerns, more than half of the project interviewees acknowledged quality as being meaningful and valuable. They translated quality as meaning ‘good’, because good was a word that forced them to take sides and to be clear about what they wanted. They argued that quality should be treated as a value to be pursued instead of being used for evaluation purposes mainly.

Dimensions of quality

The complexity of quality was discussed during the interviews and the workshop. Eighteen interviewees explained that complexity by illustrating its four main dimensions: university dependence, resource availability, supervisory interaction and learning outcome. To be specific, quality was perceived as higher education contingent, where there was a call for quality. Resource availability means that quality depended on the availability of educational inputs and learning resources, such as funding, library and computer facilities. This dimension was perceived as linking closely with the university’s reputation and brand, because the prestigious and research-intensive universities were more likely to get better resources. Most interviewees were aware that good provision did not necessarily produce a quality experience for students, as students’ commitment in learning was a key factor. This is because learning involves not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also emotion and motivation (Barnett, 2007; Illeris, 2004). Supervisory interaction was the third perceived dimension of quality, in particular, the extent to which a PhD student was supported to achieve their learning expectations. This dimension was viewed as very important in achieving students’ transformation. The outcome of PhD education was defined as the fourth dimension of quality. It referred mainly to publication, passing the viva, graduation rate, and career options. However, most interviewees perceived a danger in using indicators to assess quality because it would make quality appear as an outcome, as opposed to an ongoing process to improve oneself, weaving its way through the PhD learning experience.

Understanding transformation

As for the concept of transformation, ten interviewees described this word as educational jargon, used for institutional marketing purposes. Transformation was perceived as contradictory to the call for quality, because the latter shaped the expectation of transformation and made it appear as a deliberate outcome, but transformation is originally related to realising learner’s potential. The development of transformative learning was suggested as an effective approach to achieve transformation (Cranton, 2006; Lange, 2004; Taylor, 2008). Most interviewees from engineering and physics backgrounds expressed little
interest in transformative learning. By contrast, the majority of interviewees in education had more knowledge of this term, but they acknowledged that learning by any type could be transformative.

Forms of transformation

Research suggests that transformative changes could be individual or social (Freire, 2000; Mezirow, 2000; Daloz, 1999; Dirkx, 1998; Tisdell, 2003; and Janik, 2007). This project revealed that most interviewees related PhD students’ transformative experience to individual changes rather than social ones. Student transformation was classified under five main types: intellectual, critical, personal, emotional, and physical. There was little evidence that university type and subject differences affected interviewees’ understanding of transformation.

Intellectual transformation was described as the development of thinking that led to changed perspectives about life and subjects. It was perceived as an important pathway for students to complete their PhD and to achieve the expected quality. It was interpreted as a cognitive process, where learners’ knowledge became more integrated. Visions of caterpillars emerging as butterflies were popular images for this. New ways to solve research problems were mostly quoted.

Critical transformation was perceived as progressive, starting with uncertainty and developing from students’ reflection and discussion. The changes produced could be either positive or negative. Personal transformation was associated with a change in individuals' opinions, behaviour and attitudes. Increased commitment to learning was frequently mentioned by student interviewees. Emotional transformation was mainly referred as a psychological change. It overlapped with intellectual and personal transformation in that individuals felt motivated to learn and became committed to make changes. Physical transformation was viewed as involving a change of environment or an age-related physical feature change.

Discussion

The complexity of quality and transformation as separate concepts further explain why it was perceived as difficult in applying ‘quality as transformation’ to PhD education. In order to deepen the understandings of quality, this section is going to elaborate on the overlaps between quality and transformation, and then illustrate why half of the interviewees interpreted quality as a value to be pursued.

The outcome of PhD education was viewed as an overlap of quality and transformation. Its underpinning belief was that if a PhD student was happy with his learning outcome, he would probably become satisfied with the quality of his learning. Interviewees described the outcome as the fourth dimension of quality, and referred them to publication, passing the viva, graduation rate, and career options. The outcome intertwined with student transformation through taking on the forms of intellectual, critical, personal, emotional and physical changes.

Interviewees were well aware that PhD outcomes were subject to individuals’ expectation for new information, knowledge and skills, the right attitude to learn, and the capability to do research. In other words, some PhD students might push themselves harder in striving to be excellent, so they might experience more transformation than those who are less hard working. Moreover, a student might change his expectations upon the discovery of new possibilities, so their learning outcomes would vary over time. This suggests that PhD outcome is context contingent, depending on individuals’ specific expectations.

However, in the current higher education environment, the quality of PhD education is measured by standards and criteria. This evaluation practice further widens the gap between stakeholders’ beliefs concerning the quality of PhD education and what is evaluated as quality. This gap explains why more than half of the interviewees experienced difficulty in
defining quality, but they described it as a value to be pursued. They emotionally attributed goodness to quality. The term quality made them become clear about what they wanted from PhD education. They therefore described quality as a value, i.e., a common language to express their expectations for something valuable and meaningful. According to Perry (1914), value is a qualified satisfaction of interest (Perry, 1914). In this sense, the interviewees’ desire to fulfill their interest and expectations for PhD education played an essential role in their perceiving quality as a value. Quality as a value seeks to capture the different motives and attitudes among these interviewees, such as, scepticism about quality being used as an educational jargon and expectation for a good PhD learning experience. The interviewees were sceptical about the current practice of quality evaluation, because its focus on standards and criteria ignores the intrinsic and hard-to-measure nature of individual learning. However, they still expected good PhD education, so they felt that the meaningfulness and intrinsic nature of quality would be recognised through viewing it as a value to be pursued.

Conclusion

To summarise, this research revealed that there were different attitudes towards the concept of quality as transformation. Most interviewees found it a good idea, but they were not sure about its applicability to all subject areas, for example, engineering. The difficulty in measuring quality as transformation was expressed and there was a concern that it was hard to quantify both quality and transformation. This research further highlighted the complexity of both quality and transformation. Quality was interpreted as abstract, personal, and institution dependent. There was a gap between what interviewees expected of quality and what was evaluated as quality. More than half of the interviewees acknowledged quality as a value to be pursued, in order to fulfil their expectations for PhD education. There are potential benefits in perceiving quality as a value. One is that it might generate stakeholders’ internal sense that the concept of quality is good and important. Quality as a value will therefore positively influence their attitude and behaviour towards learning. Another benefit is that quality as a value would encourage stakeholders to use quality as a common language to collaborate to create a more positive learning experience. The third benefit is that an improved quality management system would emerge. This is because quality as a value fills the gap between stakeholders’ belief in PhD education as developing knowledge and skills and the existing practice of evaluating quality for management purpose. The gap would increase the attention to stakeholders’ belief in quality, and consequently stimulate relevant actions to improve quality for more positive learning experience.

Finally, this paper identifies that quality has been used mainly for assessment purposes in real practice. The gap between perceiving quality as a value and the practice of evaluating it by indicators makes quality appear as contradictory and confusing. This would further produce barriers for stakeholders to fully understand the meaning of student transformation. Transformation is originally associated with developing learners’ potential. However, if measured for the purpose of quality evaluation, transformation would appear as a deliberate outcome, rather than a progressive process where students produce changes and develop their capability to understand these changes. The difficulty in measuring quality and transformation produces a series of questions to be considered. One is the purpose of quality as transformation in PhD study, for whom and for what? Another question is whether higher education is ready for quality as transformation. Could it provide a context to facilitate students’ transformation without being constrained by quality indicators and standards? The third question is how to pursue quality as a value. Who will be in the position to negotiate with stakeholders on the basis of their expectations? And finally how do we encourage the fostering of quality as a value by stakeholders when there is increasing demand for using the term quality only for a summative evaluation purpose?
References


Approaches to Quality Assurance in the Changing World of Higher Education, 30 March–2 April, in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.


