A Fresh Approach to a Model for Quality in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT
There is a considerable urgency for the development of an appropriate model for quality in Higher Education. Attempts to apply the Quality Management models from industry have not been fully successful. In applying any model it is necessary to see the service and education aspects separately. Quality Management models are quite appropriate to the former. For the latter a number of models of excellence for a university proposed in the recent literature, centred around student learning, are reviewed. It is argued that a composite holistic model for quality in Higher Education can be developed addressing the service and education aspects synergistically.

Keywords: Quality in Higher Education, TQM, Service Quality.

1.0 Introduction:
Quality in HE – how to enhance it and how to evaluate it – has been placed squarely on the contemporary agenda in HE. Two main circumstances are driving the current interest in quality:

- First of all, there is not enough money to support HE; In overall terms the cost of providing HE is growing sharply, coupled with an explosive growth in student numbers and per capita decrease in government funding (Ch. 4, Tierney, 1998).
- This is exacerbated by a belief that HE has not been responsive – there is growing public scepticism that the universities are preparing students adequately to face the demanding challenges of the future workplace. This is typified by a spate of books critical of Higher Education: from Bloom’s (1987) Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students, to more recently, Aronowitz’s (2000) The Knowledge Factories: Dismantling the corporate university and creating true higher learning.

In addition, there is a real concern that the Assumptions of 20th century’s industrial economy may not hold in the knowledge economies of the 21st century. According to Sutherland (1994) the future universities must ‘introduce new and alien styles of management… to formulate and achieve objectives’. Gunkel (1994) considers that they ‘will require techniques beyond anything we know.’

Following the ‘Quality revolution’ which began sweeping industry from the late 1970s, the Higher Education sector, from 1980s onwards, started looking to it for ways of managing itself better (Srikanthan, 2001). There was an underlying assumption that the new practices would lead to the development of strategies for facing future challenges. The literature from late 1980s suggest considerable interest in the Higher Education sector in industrially popular ‘Quality Management’ models as alternative methodologies/philosophies for governance. The classical work of Freed et.al. (1997) discusses the implementation of ‘A Culture for Academic Excellence’ which presents an adaptation of Total Quality Management to Higher Education.

2.0 Quality management models and higher education

During the 1990s a number of universities attempted to implement quality management models largely in response to the expectations of the funding bodies (Seymour, 1993) to take some visible measures to improve their operational effectiveness. The measures included quality assurance practices based on international standard ISO – 9000, Total Quality Management (TQM) and Business Excellence based on Awards Criteria. The theoretical compatibility of these measures to Higher Education raised a
considerable controversy. Dill (1997), saw these techniques as providing ‘a coherent point of view that has added value.’. Newby (1999) argued that ‘Total Quality strategies are best suited to higher education purpose.’. On the other hand, Harvey (1995) concluded that ‘There are problems in implementing TQM which relate to the limited scope of defining quality…related to teaching and learning’, Bensimon (1995) argued and concluded that ‘TQM should be rejected on the grounds that, as a philosophy and theory, it is unfit for the academy’. In relation to the observed trends in Higher Education, Brigham (1993) states that ‘Many Universities have begun implementing TQM under administrative leadership and have shied away from class room and curriculum issues…’ Bonvillian et al.(p39, Sims & Sims, 1995) confirmed this trend that most of the literature dealing with TQM is focussed on ‘administrative operations and not on core functions of teaching and learning’.

Based on the trends indicated above, it appears that application TQM in relation to Higher Education has to be seen from two distinct perspectives, i.e. in relation to:

- The service to the student body from academic and general administrative functions, and
- Teaching and Learning functions.

With respect to the former, Service, the application of TQM should be no different to any other service environment where:

- The processes involved are tangible and their constant monitoring through measurement leads to quality improvements.
- The generic products involved are assumed to be of a narrow range with easily definable characteristics, eg. banking or travel, which are managed and controlled.
- The processes can reasonably be expected to be customer driven, as the composite experiences of the student body can be determined.

On the other hand, the application of TQM to teaching and learning functions presents challenges:

- The core processes involved in learning in Higher Education are too subtle to be measured in any meaningful way (Harvey, 1995),
- The teaching in Higher Education tends to be far too varied in its products delivered at each site, using an extensive range of delivery modes, processes and personnel to be managed and controlled, and
- In higher education the critical problem is the identification of the customers or products to ‘drive towards’ (ibid). The customers can variously be students, employers, government etc. depending on what is viewed as the ‘product’: education, knowledge, research etc. This creates a considerable ambiguity for the groups involved with the processes. Thus, Higher Education defies the simplistic notion that the customer serviced is easily accessed to define the expectations.

The zealouness of TQM advocates in attempting to apply it across the board in Higher Education despite its lack of fit with the subtleties of educational processes, has led to its being taunted as ‘a religion’ (Westerheijden, 1999). A failure to meet the subtler requirements of the sector, led Piper (1996) to see the current work to as ‘represent(ing) work which busies itself with minutiae rather than facing up to the issues of high quality in higher education,gentle ambles on the foothills,(not) an attempt on the heights’.

At this stage, the authors would hypothesise that a model for quality in Higher Education would have to be more complex to address service and pedagogical aspects more uniquely. So far as the service areas are concerned, TQM is an appropriate model, and it should be meshed seamlessly with a model addressing the core areas of teaching and learning. The composite would then become a holistic model for quality in Higher Education.
At a theoretical level, from time to time, there has been a re-examination of the fundamental educational processes and a number of new models have been proposed for educational excellence in universities. Some of the well-articulated models are briefly described below. Their organisational implications for universities will be examined subsequently.

3.0 Models for Quality in Higher Education:

3.1 Transformative Model of Quality:

Harvey and Knight (1996) spelt out their approach in the book ‘Transforming Higher
Transformative learning requires a transparent process which provides an integrated experience, enhancing and empowering students. The quality policies have to be learning-orientated, and should relate to the Student Experience. Learning experience is based on a dialogue between participant and providers. The system requires a focus on the total learning experience – all aspects of students’ experience which impact upon their learning. This means a shift of focus to ‘student learning’ rather than ‘staff teaching’.

Transparency means openness about the aims, processes and method of attainment of learning by the student. Integration means that such experiences are linked together into a cohesive whole. Dialogue involves the discussions between learners and teachers about the nature scope and style of their learning. Dialogue also requires a dynamic exchange among the teachers about the teaching and learning process. Overall, transformative approach is really about being responsive.

3.2 An Engagement Model of Program Quality:

Haworth and Conrad (1997) in their book ‘Emblems of Quality in Higher Education’ develop an ‘Engagement Theory’ of program quality based on an extensive interview of persons involved in Higher Education. The theory maintains that in high quality programs the principal stakeholders – academics, students and administrators – invest in five separate clusters of program attributes, each of which contributes to enriching the learning experiences for students.

- **Cluster 1: Diverse and Engaged Participants:** Faculty, Students and Leaders.
- **Cluster 2: Participatory cultures:**
  - Shared program direction,
  - Community of learners, and
  - Risk taking environments.
- **Cluster 3: Interactive Teaching and learning:**
  - Critical dialogue,
  - Integrative Learning,
  - Mentoring,
  - Cooperative Peer learning, and
  - Out of Class activities.
- **Cluster 4: Connected Program Requirements**
  - Planned Breadth and Depth of Coursework,
  - Professional Residency, and
  - Tangible Product.
- **Cluster 5: Adequate Resources**
  - Support for Students, Faculty and Basic Infrastructure.

In broad terms, the engagement theory advances a new perspective on program quality that builds upon, extends and deepens the current understandings.
3.3 University of Learning Model:

Bowden and Marton in their book ‘University of Learning’ (1998) examine the organisational characteristics of higher education, from a pedagogical perspective. They postulate that in all its commonly perceived functions: teaching, research or community involvement, the core process is one of learning (at different levels). Hence they argue that quality in a university context has to do with quality of learning. They describe the quality of learning as relating to qualities of different ways of seeing, that a learner gains: multiplicity of perspectives or richness of vision. The authors examine the organisational characteristics conducive to quality of its processes and derive the attributes of a ‘university of learning’. Academics commit themselves to a deep exploration of the subject matter from the learner’s perspective to develop alternative patterns of understanding. There is a synergistic involvement in a course team, developing, along with colleagues, a holistic view of student competencies in students created by the course experience. They explore the potential for ‘discerning different ways of understanding a phenomenon. They develop a collective consciousness of what is common and what is complementary. There is an uninhibited communication where differences and complementarities brought into the open to get a clear view of each one’s position.

Thus, large groups interdependent groups of academics and administrators working in concert create the image of a ‘University of Learning’.

3.4 A Model for a Responsive University:

Tierney (1998) collated the views of a number of leading authors on ‘Restructuring for High Performance’ in a book entitled ‘The Responsive University’, which together formed a whole model for excellence. The Emphasis is on development of new internal relationships through communication and partnerships. Responsiveness comes from service orientation with a focus on customers: this means student centred in programs, community centred in outreach and nation centred in research. There is a need to move from the traditional production function of Instruction – to using new tools to meeting the needs of students. Organisation systems must be ‘information coupled’ to be responsive.

Responsiveness will depend on the outcomes of the relationships – not on inputs eg. no. of PhDs on staff, No. of books in library etc. The staff must develop an outcome orientation – with a commitment to performance contracts. There is an obligation to measure to determine whether you are adding value or making a difference. External relationships are important for quality where contributions are complementary - characterised by mutuality and equality – with joint ventures between and across institutions. The universities must develop new conversations in terms of system wide policies, regional benefits and joint ventures for meeting a variety of public needs.

4.0 Developing a Composite Model for Quality in Higher Education

There is clear focus in all the models on the student learning experience, when one makes judgements about quality. The ‘Transformative Model’ of Harvey and Knight (1996) requires quality policies to be learning-orientated to result in “Total Transformative learning”. The ‘Engagement Model’ of Haworth and Conrad (1997) maintains that the clusters of program attributes should contribute to enriching the learning experiences for students. In the ‘University of Learning’ model, Bowden and Marton (1998) argue that quality in university context relates strongly to quality of learning. They describe the quality of learning as relating to qualities of different ways of seeing, that a learner gains: multiplicity of perspectives or a richness of vision. Tierney (1998) sees the Responsiveness of a University to be coming from a service orientation, which is richly described to mean student centred in
programs, community centred in outreach and nation centred in research. This is seen as a move away from traditional production function of Instruction – to using new tools to meeting the needs of students.

All the above models also emphasise collaboration at the education delivery level. The ‘Transformative Model’, requires the learning experience to be based on a dialogue between the learners and teachers about the nature, scope and style of their learning, and also among the teachers about the teaching and learning process. The ‘Engagement Model’ foresees teaching and learning to be based on critical dialogue, mentoring and cooperative peer learning. The ‘University of Learning’ model highlights a synergistic involvement of academics in a course/research team, developing a holistic view of student competencies and a collective consciousness of what is common and what is complementary. The ‘Responsive University’ model emphasises communication, which requires new relationships and partnerships.

Thus while each model has its own unique perspective on educational excellence in a university, they all seem to be focussed on the core element of student learning supported by a dynamic collaboration around it. Therefore, it could, in effect, be possible to view a university’s educational performance in terms of a holistic model incorporating, in varying measures, the features emphasised by the different models.

In a similar way, the Total Quality Management model in terms of delivery of service functions on campus would also be expected to be Student Focussed and operationalised in terms of a dynamic collaboration among the providers.

Thus, the main thrust of all the approaches is, by and large, the same. Hence the development of a comprehensive model covering the education and service delivery aspects on the campus should work out to be reasonably feasible.

An important challenge is how to implement the model. A reviewer of the ‘Responsive University’ model, Julius (2000) argues, inspite of its elegance it fails to address core issues like, how people ‘can be motivated to change’, ‘how to assess behavioural changes’ and ‘the nature of leading changes’. In other words ‘..management of human resources and a critical appraisal of how change is (to be) made in politicised environments (as one typically finds in Higher Education)’ (ibid) is identified as the missing link in the model. Interestingly, the same comments can be applied with equal validity to the other models cited.

Even in applying the well documented methodologies of Total Quality Management, Senge et.al. (pp445, 1994) point out how upto 80% of the implementation efforts end in failure, due to a lack of ‘transformational leadership’. Managers seem skilled in the control paradigm – ‘in working on people rather than working with them.’ ‘Organisational learning’ is seen as ‘the basis of consistent quality

In other words, while all the models portray a rich picture of the ideals of excellence in the operation of an university they are in need of a management methodology to address the organisational issues. Traditionally the universities applied organisational structures similar to Mintzberg’s ‘Professional Bureaucracy’ (pp252, Robbins and Barnwell, 1998) with a high complexity, centralisation and formalisation. This has brought about a considerable rigidity in their operation with attendant fragmentation (Ewell, 1997; pp235, Bowden & Marton, 1998). As per Chandler’s theory (pp109, Robbins and Barnwell, 1998) it is necessary to carefully rethink the structural issues, to match with the changing strategies and realities.
5.0 An Approach to the Issue of Implementation

On implementation, the theories on ‘learning organisation’ as expounded by Argyris (1978) and Senge (1990) seem to be the only comprehensive basis for developing a collaborative committed interaction in organisational processes as espoused by the excellence models discussed earlier. The learning organisation theories are essentially organisation behaviour focussed, providing a basis for the development of a supportive organisational structure. According to the Senge’s theory, typically an organisation changes from a ‘controlling organisation’ to a ‘learning’ one by people mastering certain (five) disciplines. They are personal disciplines relating to how people think, what they want and how they relate to each other. As the organisation acquires the disciplines, culture in the organisation transforms by consistently empowering the employees. Through learning, the organisation attains a capacity to create its future (Senge, 1990, ch1, pt1).

In a modern society, universities play the role of places of highest learning. In many ways, the disciplines of a learning organisation appear an ideal fit with the traditional value system of a tertiary institution. When one examines the functioning of an academic discipline in a university, it epitomises the core values emphasised as the basis of learning organisations. The academic pursuits are underpinned by ‘Systems thinking’ (discipline 1), where full pattern of events influencing phenomena are pursued and portrayed. ‘Personal Mastery’ (discipline 2) is a strong academic value expressed by ‘pursuit of excellence’. An academic constantly queries the ‘Mental models’ (discipline 3) whereby the current paradigm is constantly challenged to project new visions of reality. ‘Building a shared vision’ (discipline 4) is the purpose of all learned congregations where each one excels in a certain perspective. ‘Team learning’ (discipline 5) is the basis of academic activity to develop a holistic vision. ‘What university could refuse to embrace that as an ideal?’ wonders Piper (1996).

Overall, an attempt at synthesising the essence of the excellence models for Higher Education and implementing them on the basis of disciplines of the learning organisation principles should begin to provide a balanced approach among the educational, service and organisational excellence ethos for Higher Education.

6.0 On Clarifying the Details of the Model:

Ideally two clear steps are needed for the development:

- The characteristics of excellence as described in the various models should be synthesised and developed,
- The organisation structure and behaviour issues should be considered in detail based on the rapidly expanding Learning Organisation theories.

It is to be recognised that sufficient work has not been done at this stage to describe these aspects to appropriate level of clarity. Meanwhile the only thing which can claimed on the basis of what has been described so far is that a framework for development seems visible in the far horizon. Hopefully it will not be another mirage!

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