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Teaching quality and student satisfaction: nexus or simulacrum?

Rod Beecham*

IDP Education Pty Ltd, Australia

Quality has clear meanings when associated with specific phenomena. The relative nature of quality in commercial contexts, specifically in relation to manufactured goods, has been studied. In service industries there is no satisfactory indicator of quality. The Likert-scale questionnaire does not allow the researcher to distinguish between spontaneous and constructed responses. The penetration of the premises of human capital theory and services marketing theory in the higher education sector has introduced inapplicable assumptions about and instruments of quality control. A study of one Australian university's re-definition of itself as a market-oriented institution suggests that long-standing criticisms of the use of student questionnaires as a measure of teaching quality are well-founded.

Keywords: quality; product; service; measurement; conformity; predictability; customer satisfaction; fitness for use

Introduction

> I suspect that quality may appear a strange term to you, and that you do not understand the word when thus generalised. Then I will take particular cases: I mean to say that the producing power or agent becomes neither heat nor whiteness, but hot and white, and the like of other things. For I must repeat what I said before, that neither the agent nor patient have any absolute existence, but when they come together and generate sensations and sensible things, the one becomes of a certain quality, and the other percipient. (Plato, *Theaetetus* 182a)

The term 'quality' encompasses a range of meanings in relation to both human and inanimate phenomena. It has been written about a good deal in connection with higher education (Wright 1989; Rinehart 1993; Williams 1993; Lewis and Smith 1994; Tapper and Salter 1998; Randall 2002; Alderman and Brown 2005). My argument is that, in the UK, Australia and elsewhere, the direction of government funding to those higher educational institutions which incur the lowest costs per student and demonstrate a high level of concern with teaching performance has transformed the term 'quality' into a normative construct drained of much of its essential meaning. To support this contention I review the history of quality in the commercial context, noting the distinction between commercial quality assessments of inanimate phenomena (products) and of animate phenomena (services). I take it as axiomatic that teaching and learning are not, ultimately, separable activities, that it follows necessarily that neither can take place outside the relationship that obtains between teacher and student, and that this relationship cannot be characterized in any meaningful sense as either a 'product' or a 'service'.

Customer satisfaction in the commercial arena also resists definition and measurement; specifically, there are intractable problems associated with data derived from Likert-scale questionnaires. My discussion highlights the tendency to authoritarianism associated with instruments of measurement derived from the combination of human capital theory and

*Email: rbeecham@bigpond.net.au

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services marketing theory and, to illustrate this, concludes with a brief history of teaching-quality measurement in one Australian university. The history indicates that the long-standing criticisms of the use of student questionnaires as a measure of teaching quality are well founded.

Quality of product

Applied to inanimate phenomena, quality can be an attribute or property of a thing, a manner or style, a habit, a power or faculty, the nature or character of something. In relation to sound, quality can be a synonym for fidelity, meaning the degree to which reproduced sound resembles the original. It can also denote that which distinguishes sounds that are quantitatively the same (timbre). In engineering, quality is the proportion by weight of vapour in a mixture of vapour and the parent liquid. In radiology, quality is the penetrating power of a beam of X-rays.

Quality is, then, a nuanced term, one presenting many different aspects, and one intimately associated with classification, which of course is the sense of its Latin root, *qualis*, meaning 'of what kind'.

The evolution of the term 'quality' in the commercial context has been traced by Reeves and Bednar (1994). They show that there is no consistency in the definition of the term, even in the world of business. They show that what Cameron and Whetten (1983, 3) said about the term 'effectiveness' applies also to the term 'quality'.

> Universalistic propositions linking a set of variables to effectiveness can never be known because the meaning of the dependent variable continually changes. Depending on the model of organizational effectiveness being used, the relationships may disappear, become irrelevant, increase, or reverse themselves.

The first point, then, is that any concept of quality in higher education must be securely and permanently related to a clear and fixed definition of the purpose of higher education. No such definition exists unattached to a political or ideological framework. It follows, therefore, that standards of quality in higher education are likely to serve the interests of those who control the higher educational institutions. In the contemporary British and Australian contexts, that means the national government.

Reeves and Bednar trace the association of quality and value, indicating that the industrial revolution marked a shift in the location of value from the commodity itself (intrinsic quality) to the relationship between the commodity and its price (relative quality). They then show how conformance to specifications became a dominant definition of quality when such conformance became the key to successful mass production, as made famous by Henry Ford (Reeves and Bednar 1994, 420–22).

In the context of mass production, conformance to specifications is synonymous with standardization of product. A landmark publication in the history of commercial quality control expressed the concept as follows (Shewhart 1931, 44).

> We must define quality of product in such a way that the numerical measure of this quality serves the following two purposes:
>
> (1) To make it possible for one to see whether or not the quality of product for a given period differs from that for some other period taken as a basis of comparison.
> (2) To make possible the comparison of qualities of product for two or more periods to determine whether or not the differences are greater than should be left to chance.

In manufacturing industry, the realm of products, predictability, conformity and the minimization of difference are the hallmarks of quality. The purpose of an instrument for measuring quality is to detect and thereby help to eliminate such differences. Clearly, such an instrument would not be appropriate to higher education, unless the purpose of higher education is not to develop intellect and personality but to train the next generation of *apparatchiks*. A product-based view of quality in an age of mass higher education will mean standardization: a focus on the elimination of difference, itself a repressive and anti-educational impulse.

Measurement: science and pseudo-science

Shewhart's words, 'numerical measure', are significant. Lord Kelvin famously remarked (Thomson 1884, 149):

> … when you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind: it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely, in your thoughts, advanced to the stage of *science*, whatever the matter may be.

The ability to express something in numbers is a passport to credibility. The talismanic word, 'science,' is implied by numbers. Marketers will therefore write equations in the manner of mathematicians or theoretical physicists.

$$SQ_i = \sum_{j=1}^{k} W_j \quad (P_{ij} - E_{ij}) \tag{1}$$

This equation is a model for measuring the quality of customer service proposed by R. Kenneth Teas (Teas 1993, 19). Numbers and mathematical formulae, of course, are useful tools of scholarly enquiry, but they are symbols, and it is not only legitimate but essential in every case to ensure that what they symbolize has been adequately defined. The symbols in the equation above represent a measuring tool, SERVQUAL, attributes of customer service, a weighting factor, performance perception and service quality expectation.

The difficulty here, I think, can be likened to that of trying to wrap water in a brown paper bag. Customer perception of performance (i.e., the customers' responses to the commercial transaction) and their expectations of that commercial transaction based on its nature (i.e., the differing expectations someone would bring to the purchase of a car as opposed to the purchase of a newspaper) are incapable of precise definition because they will always be individual. Human interactions involve an imaginative dimension that cannot be captured in a mathematical model. Teas' equation does not, as the equation of a theoretical physicist might, seek to explain an aspect of existence in a way consistent with observable fact: it functions instead to lend a spurious authority to common-sense relationships.

This brings me to a crucial point: what I would describe as the collision between the collective and the individual. One can suggest that the exhibition of certain behaviours by a majority of people is probable under a particular set of conditions, but one cannot say for certain that a given person will behave in a particular way under any conditions. Of course, no one who purports to measure quality in higher education would, as far as I know, claim that the measuring tools for customer satisfaction are precise, but they would, I think, suggest that a general picture is better than no picture at all. My objection to this is that teaching and learning cannot occur outside the relationship that obtains between teacher and student, and that this relationship is – because it must be – individual.

Quality of service

The services marketing boom of the 1980s generated a large quantity of research into ways and means of measuring customer satisfaction. The SERVQUAL model was developed and widely discussed, as were more general aspects of customer satisfaction measurement (Parasuraman et al. 1986; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Parasuraman et al. 1994; Iacobucci et al. 1995; Slater and Narver 1998).

The notion of 'satisfaction' relates to desires or feelings and is therefore one wedded completely to a sentient being. It is of its nature a subjective phenomenon, even outside its specifically psychological meaning of the satisfying of a need or desire as it affects or motivates behaviour.

A moment's reflection tells us that different individuals can derive satisfaction in conflicting ways. The results of elections, particular forms of entertainment, types of work – one person can derive satisfaction from something another person finds distressing. So examination of the notion of customer satisfaction is complicated – I would suggest, prohibitively – by the fact that human subjectivity imposes uncontrollable limitations on the extent to which products and transactions promote satisfaction.

It may be argued, of course, that while a service-provider cannot hope to please all the customers all the time it should nevertheless try to please most of them most of the time. This is an argument for standardization and, even in commercial contexts, it requires qualification. High-end car manufacturers, for example, displease the majority of car-buyers because their products are so expensive. But high-end car manufacturers derive their brand value from their exclusivity. Mainstream car manufacturers, on the other hand, make cheaper products that can be sold in large numbers. The cars may not be special, but they do the job.

A university will hope to please the majority of its students, but to take services marketing logic into the classroom is to assume that education is a commodity. It would seem to me perverse to argue that the teacher–student relationship in which education takes place is capable of being bought and sold like a car. No one would say that, of course, but my point is that it is, in fact, the logic of the 'customer satisfaction' approach to higher educational quality: you can't measure higher educational quality unless you have commodified it first, and the act of commodification removes the things measured – teaching and learning - from the context in which they possess meaning.

It seems to me equally perverse to suggest that every university should be the same. The commercial logic of this is that, to be competitive, a university must offer the same courses as its rivals but at a lower cost, allowing it to charge lower fees. That sounds reasonable until one reflects that certain items, such as scientific instrumentation, are very expensive. Certain subjects, therefore, will attract much higher fees than others, making it correspondingly harder for them to attract students in numbers sufficient to cover costs. Science students are not statistically likely to have higher incomes than students studying business or law.

A representative example of services marketing reasoning is the following (Heskett et al. 1994a, 164–5).

> Profit and growth are stimulated primarily by customer loyalty. Loyalty is a direct result of customer satisfaction. Satisfaction is largely influenced by the value of services provided to customers. Value is created by satisfied, loyal, and productive employees. Employee satisfaction, in turn, results primarily from high-quality support services and policies that enable employees to deliver results to customers.

There is an appearance of applied common sense about this, but on close inspection it proves to be an accumulation of contentious abstract nouns held together by well chosen adverbs. It may be unreasonable to expect precise definitions of terms such as 'profit', 'growth', 'loyalty', 'satisfaction', 'services', 'value', 'policies' and 'results', but the sheer number of these and like terms deployed without explanation makes it difficult to determine whether the authors' argument has any validity. Similarly, the caveats – 'primarily', 'largely' – protect the piece against any specific instance that might seem to contradict the argument.

A series of 25 questions is appended to the article. These questions purport to assist organizations to determine what drives their profit (Heskett et al. 1994b).

The most interesting question is number five: 'Are customer satisfaction data gathered in an objective, consistent, and periodic fashion?' Customer satisfaction has not been defined, and the connection between it and customer loyalty (also undefined) has not been established. In their explanatory notes to the question the authors suggest that companies can obtain 'objective results using "third party" interviews; "mystery shopping" by unidentified, paid observers; or technologies like touch-screen television' (Heskett et al. 1994b, 171).

Who will these third-party interviewers be? On what basis will they be recruited? What would be their brief? How would the interviewees be selected? Under what circumstances would the interviews be conducted? How much mystery shopping would have to take place to develop a representative picture? Why would a customer use touch-screen television? What sort of customer might use touch-screen television? In what industries would these various sampling techniques be capable of employment? How might we discriminate between customer assessments of product and customer assessments of service? How might we discriminate between customer assessments of the service itself and the support services surrounding it?

There is no discussion of quality in this article. No connection between quality and customer satisfaction is established, and no discrimination between types of product and types of service – or, indeed, between product-based organizations and service-based organizations *per se* – is attempted. The argument seems scarcely more sophisticated than an assertion that if you're nice to people they'll come back so you should take steps to ensure that you know whether you're being nice to people.

This, it is no exaggeration to say, is the theoretical underpinning of student satisfaction surveys. The efficacy of the instrument has not been validated at all, despite abundant research on the cognitive processes that underlie responses to survey questions which confirms that human subjectivity creates unmanageable complications in data analysis (Wright and Kriewall 1980; Schuman and Presser 1981; Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988; Martin and Tesser 1992). Simmons et al. (1993, 316) observe that:

> … respondents do not simply answer researchers' questions by retrieving preexisting answers from memory. Instead, respondents are often faced with questions about issues about which they have given little prior thought; their answers to these questions are likely to be constructed on the spot. Survey researchers unwittingly shape this process of construction by engendering in respondents a mental context that differs from that created spontaneously by events in everyday life.

In other words, the meeting-and/or-exceeding expectations definition of quality has been challenged and, to those who wish to listen, proved non-viable by scholars working in the areas of psychology, social research and marketing. In tracing the evolution of the various commercial definitions of quality, Reeves and Bednar have shown that there are trade-offs inherent in accepting one definition over another. They have shown that the definition of quality is itself a quality issue, that it is about fitness for use (Reeves and Bednar 1994, 435–6).

What is the purpose of higher education?

This returns us to the point that a clear and fixed definition of the purpose of higher education is the prerequisite for a meaningful definition of quality in the higher educational context.

If the purpose of higher education is to make a profit for the institution offering the education, the quality of the institution's offerings should be related to its success in meeting market demand. However, as the variety of attempts to do so suggest (Marginson 1995; Gibbs 2001; Marginson and Rhoades 2002; Jongbloed 2003; Steier 2003; Pugsley 2004), 'the market' cannot be defined with any precision in higher education and tuition fees can be paid and repeat business obtained for a wide variety of reasons.

A way of determining instructional costs for different types of students and different types of teachers was proposed as far back as Beaumont (1941), but management accounting does not seem to have adapted itself well to the nature of higher education – or, indeed, to any service-provision industry. Both accounting methods and attempts to 'professionalize' tertiary teaching – a euphemism for trying to force academic teaching staff to behave as if they work for a corporation – tend to enforce conformity and predictability. This is desirable for administrators because it makes everything easier to measure, but conformity and predictability mean that the outstanding is eliminated along with the sub-standard (cf. the mainstream car manufacturer). What attempts to corporatize the higher education sector mean in practice, whatever the intended effect, is the tyranny of the measuring instrument, which becomes a tool of social engineering rather than one that gauges progress. Indeed, a good deal of the 'pro-corporate' literature on higher education has been explicit about the desire to control teaching staff (Becker 1949; Gray 1969; Beller 1971; Fenker 1977; Smock and Brandenburg 1978).

It is interesting to note how closely this resembles a business phenomenon applauded by the authors of one of the most successful popular books on management (Peters and Waterman 1982, 177–8).

> Quality and reliability are *not* synonymous with exotic technology. It was especially interesting, and surprising, to us to find that even in higher technology businesses, reliability was always preferred over sheer technical wizardry. The star performers consciously sacrifice an unproven technology for something that works. We call the phenomenon 'second to the marketplace and proud of it'.

This is a conception of quality not only conformist but implicitly hostile to innovation. It discourages risk-taking and, taken to its logical conclusion, means that the organization will never do anything differently. The authoritarianism of it is startling, and was noticed by at least one reviewer (Mitchell 1985, 353).

A thorough analysis of methods of quality assessment in higher education was conducted more than thirty years ago. Every word of the authors' criticisms still applies today (Johnson et al. 1975a, 176).

> Attempts at constructing programs for evaluating teaching or instruction have been largely unsuccessful and frequently harmful in their effect. These attempts at evaluating teaching are conceived and focused narrowly, indeed almost exclusively, in terms of isolated, individual classroom activities. They are usually separated from the educational context, with its social and cultural reference. Almost entirely, such attempts have been centered in single instruments administered episodically rather than as part of a cumulative program. Evaluation has consequently been realized in terms of solitary, discrete acts, largely (we should argue) because of the methodological form which has seemed most attractive and immediately useful in terms of institutional interests. Finally, each of what we regard as the three fundamental approaches to evaluation presupposes (but usually entirely unconsciously and hence uncritically) some 'model' or definition of the teaching process which is ambiguous, unclear, or dubious, and which is frequently mis-educative – i.e., runs contrary to any defensible concept of education as a normative construct. Consequently such instruments are not only practically failing but are incapable of fulfilling the task we have asserted to be fundamental: the warranted improvement of instructional activity or teaching within the context of education and schooling.

A particularly important point made by these authors is the failure of those purporting to assess the quality of higher education to distinguish between description, measurement and evaluation. To describe something is to give an account of it; to measure something is to represent it numerically; to evaluate something is to make a judgement about its worth. To collapse the distinctions between the three is to allow description to be presented as evaluation; an example of the way authoritarian discourse drains language of its nuances, substituting lexical norms that suit the purposes of those in control.

Has the product been delivered?

Let us assume for a moment that human relationship is irrelevant, that teaching involves the delivery of a product, information, and that the teacher is trying, in Young's famous words, 'to get an idea as exactly as possible out of one mind into another' (Gowers 1967, 9). If this were true we would, taking the manufacturing view of quality, wish the teacher to convey the same information in the same way to his or her students every time.

It is certainly desirable that what the students who attend the 10.00am lecture receive is the same as that received by the students who attend the repeat session at 3.15pm, but it is difficult to think of any other aspect in which conformity in teaching is necessary, and student questionnaires do not – because they cannot – measure this single, desirable conformist aspect. In any case, as Plato observes, 'neither the agent [teaching] nor patient [learning] have any absolute existence, but when they come together and generate actions and sensible things, the one becomes of a certain quality, and the other percipient' (Plato 1875, 333). Relationship, that is, is always unique to time and circumstance.

Looking at the product itself, information, we may wish to determine whether it has in fact been received by the customer, the student, in the way we would wish it to be received. The problem here, though, is that a customer satisfaction survey attempts to assess the effectiveness of a communication mechanism by testing the line at only one end. You have to ask the sender what message was being conveyed before you can ask the intended recipient whether it was received. It would be very odd for a telephone company to undertake line-testing in the way the student questionnaires are used to test the effectiveness of instruction.

Asking the consumer of an 'educational product' whether s/he is satisfied with that product involves difficulties. Combining human capital theory and services marketing theory suggests that Juran's famous definition of quality, 'fitness for use', should apply (Juran and Godfrey 1999, 7.4–7.6). But student-customers cannot meaningfully be asked about fitness for use because they haven't begun to use the product. If every student in a university studies every subject with an eye to his or her future employment – which is also not true because, as research indicates, even students in professional Masters programs don't do that (Pratt et al. 1999) – then the time factor intrudes, as it does with cars and whitegoods and other major purchases. The student won't know until some time after graduation how good the product is.

Was the service satisfactory?

The alternative assumption, that in teaching we are delivering a service rather than a product, introduces problems of its own, the major one being that no satisfactory way of measuring service quality exists. If, however, we wish to ignore that problem and measure customer satisfaction in the usual way, by asking customers to complete a questionnaire, we face the problem of defining the thing or things with which they are or are not satisfied. Are we asking them about the subject or about the lecturer? If, like a retail outlet, a university is polling for a customer service award, the focus is less on the subject and more on the lecturer. On the other hand, if the institution is interested in what students think about their subjects, then it is not a services organization at all: a subject is a product, and the university should make it clear that it seeks responses to the product, not the salesperson.

Of the students' perspective – the learning perspective – not much is known. A fundamental tenet of services marketing is that you must be as close to your customer as possible: those who design student questionnaires are a long way from the customers. We have already seen that the individuality of people makes generalizing about the quality of a single product or service extremely hazardous. How much more hazardous does this become when the offerings include law, medicine, engineering, economics, architecture, zoology, music, chemistry and history?

There is little evidence of purposeful thinking in student questionnaires, and this seems to originate in an absence of adequate reflection on what it is that universities actually do. Until you know exactly what it is you are measuring, why you are measuring it, and that the measuring instrument you are using has been proven, through rigorous testing, to yield the information you seek, quality, whether of product or transaction, remains nothing more than a rhetorical catch-cry.

These are facts that have been in the public domain for decades. A case study indicates the extent to which they have been ignored.

Case study: the University of Melbourne

The effects of the imposition by the Australian government of a unified national higher education system in the late 1980s have been much discussed (Marginson and Considine 2000; Biggs and Davis 2002; Pick 2006). At least one Australian university, the University of Melbourne, sought to accommodate itself to the new regime through a strategic planning process. The second objective of the strategic plan presented to the University's Academic Board for approval was: 'To implement quality assurance measures to ensure that the quality of education being offered meets the objectives of the University' (Joint Committee on Policy 1994).

The objectives of the University were, as might be expected, too general to be given operational form, and no definition of quality was proposed in the document. Six of the eight 'strategies' attached to the quality objective involved input from students. Two should be quoted in full (Joint Committee on Policy 1994).

> 2.2 Implement regular and systematic student evaluation of teaching and their educational experience.
> 2.6 Student evaluations of teaching performance to be taken into account in staff appraisal and recommendations in respect of applications for staff development activities, incremental progression and promotion.

'Evaluation' is substituted for 'description' in the first point, just as Johnson et al. (1975a) described, and in the second point is made an instrument of managerial control.

Meanwhile, the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education had been established by the Australian government in November 1992 as a non-statutory ministerial advisory committee to assist the national government to ensure the quality of Australia's higher educational system (Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education 1994, 4). The committee was set up in response to allegations of a 'level of disaffection with the performance of universities,' perceived changes to the median age and proportion of part-time involvement of the student population, and 'the increasing level of market forces and competition in higher education' (Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education 1994, 2). (The report was silent regarding the second part of the committee's brief, which was to advise the Minister for Employment, Education and Training on the allocation of funds.)

What the foregoing shows is that the tenets of human capital theory, combined with popular ideas about services marketing, were penetrating both the University of Melbourne and the Australian government. Students were being re-conceptualized as investor–customers, and it therefore became the responsibility of the university to ensure that they received an adequate return. If they didn't, the government would punish the university – in the interests of 'effectiveness'. 'The present focus on quality in higher education reflects the general societal interest in more effective performance leading to greater customer satisfaction' (Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education 1994, 3). The conformist and authoritarian character of this notion of quality is revealed in the sentence: 'Where no benchmarking is planned or underway, there must be concerns about the effects of institutional isolation from the rest of the sector' (Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education 1995, I: 11).

The Committee's report on the University of Melbourne was tabled at the same meeting of that University's Academic Board that reviewed the Vice-Chancellor's draft strategic plan. The Committee's report observed that: 'Student questionnaires are reported as being a "powerful tool to bring change to academic departments" and "have contributed to very substantial change in student perception of the quality of the courses"' (Vice-Chancellor's Report to Academic Board 1994).

A more explicit statement of the purpose of student questionnaires being to act as a managerial lever is hard to imagine. It has been argued that the questionnaires make transparent the strengths and weaknesses of teaching activities, but I contend that human relationship is incapable of 'measurement' and that, even if it were, the Likert-scale instrument is too unreliable to be used for the measurement of anything.

The real purpose of the questionnaires was described quite clearly at this meeting of the University of Melbourne's Academic Board: they are an instrument to enforce organizational change while making the students feel there is an interest in their welfare. The minutes of the meeting state (Academic Board 1994a, 2–3):

> The Vice-Chancellor advised that the focus of the review to be conducted in 1994 by the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education would be primarily on teaching and learning… It is therefore imperative that particular attention be paid to outcomes from student feedback mechanisms already in place. He said that the planning visits to begin in April would focus on the same issues as the Quality Committee and the $\pm 1\%$ variations to faculty budgets for 1995 would be judged primarily on the quality of faculties' teaching and learning and their processes to safeguard these activities.

Subsequent meetings, reports and reviews show that while other, equally ill-considered methods of quality assurance were tried at the university, the Likert-scale questionnaire administered to students at the end of each semester became the University of Melbourne's sole institution-wide method of teaching evaluation.

There is not a single methodological error pointed out by Johnson et al. (1975a) that this method does not involve. It is conceived and focused exclusively in terms of isolated, individual classroom activities. It is separated from the educational context, with its social and cultural reference. It is administered episodically rather than as part of a cumulative program. It presupposes an unexplained and uncommunicated definition of the teaching process.

There is evidence that the questionnaire at the University of Melbourne was written, at least initially, by the then Vice-Chancellor himself. In August 1994 the Academic Board endorsed two new common questions following representations from the Vice-Chancellor. After objections from one member to the employment of the word 'good', the wording of one of the new questions was altered on the spot by the Vice-Chancellor in consultation with the President of the Academic Board (Academic Board 1994b, 3).

The normative re-construction of the word 'quality' was institutionalized at the University of Melbourne in 1995. When the student surveys came up for discussion at Academic Board in March of that year they appeared in the minutes as: '9.4 Common Questions in Student Questionnaires' (Academic Board 1995a, 3). The next time they were discussed at Academic Board they appeared in the minutes under: '9.2 Feedback on Quality of Teaching, Second Semester 1995' (Academic Board 1995b, 3). Without explanation, impressionistic student descriptions of their lecture-theatre experience have metamorphosed into a holistic evaluation of teaching quality throughout the university.

By early 1996 the new Vice-Chancellor was proposing 'an integrated approach involving… an annual *Client Satisfaction Survey Cycle* reflecting the desirability of permitting the consumers of University programs and services to report annually on the quality, relevance and availability of those programs and services' (Academic Board 1996, 18 [italics original]). The word 'consumers' reveals that behind the managerial initiatives around quality was a commodified view of higher education. A new committee of the Academic Board, the Teaching and Learning Quality Assurance Committee (TALQAC), was proposed as part of the approach. TALQAC's subsequent history shows that its function was to defend and enforce the use of Likert-scale student questionnaires.

It is probably not too much to say that more resentment has been created among the University of Melbourne's academic teaching staff by the conflation of 'student survey' and 'quality of teaching' than by any other manifestation of University policy. A largely improvised questionnaire intended to gain some insight into student perceptions of their experience – although, as we have seen, there is no way to distinguish between a spontaneous and a constructed response – has become a way of measuring teaching – not the students' perceptions of teaching, but teaching itself, and despite the fact that numbers cannot represent the relational and imaginative dimension within which teaching and learning occur. Further, this improvised questionnaire has become the decisive means by which the worth of an academic teacher's performance is judged. It is employed in the way a commercial enterprise would employ a customer satisfaction survey, although, as we have seen, customer satisfaction is incapable of measurement and marketing evaluation instruments do not distinguish adequately between the service delivered and the manner of its delivery.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the nature of the university, considered as an institution in Britain, Australia and elsewhere, has changed over the last 30 years. Commercially focused mass higher education means much larger numbers of students and the erosion of many disciplines in the arts and the pure sciences because they are not cost-effective (i.e., the ratio of staff to students is too high). It has also meant the introduction of instruments of performance measurement from more traditional areas of commerce. What it has not meant, however, is any change in the nature of the teaching and learning experience. Commercially based performance measures do not connect with that experience at all.

Larger numbers of students mean that the teaching and learning experience is diluted because the number of relationships within the classroom is much greater than it used to be, and, in seeking to cater for the imagined wishes of the student majority, the customer satisfaction questionnaire disempowers the teacher and engineers an anti-educational blandness and predictability in teaching content and style that consorts oddly with the 'effectiveness' and 'excellence' for which the competing institutions claim to strive.

Notes on contributor

Rod Beecham was educated at Monash University and Jesus College, Oxford. He has taught more than 1000 students from more than 21 countries in both Australia and England. He currently works as a Project Manager for IDP Education Pty Ltd.

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