

Quality: More Complicated Than Ever

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Quality education used to be so simple—carefully select qualified students, provide them with content in an academic area, and award a diploma to reflect an acceptable level of knowledge and performance. Changing realities have muddied the meaning and measure of quality.

Gross enrollment ratios have increased nearly everywhere. Although this is a good thing for developed and developing countries alike, expanded enrollments inevitably mean enrolling students with wide-ranging prior preparation. In most cases, universities are presented with huge gaps in knowledge and skills that impede academic success. Institutions must either allocate resources for remedial instruction—with limited promise since the deficiencies accumulated over 12 years are not easily remedied; lower performance expectations; or accept high attrition rates. Each strategy has implications for institutional quality.

Financial pressures on higher education are increasing. Where higher education is provided at public institutions at low, or no cost, enrollment capacity is limited. This has led the expansion of a “demand-absorbing” private sector, with a growing for-profit subsector. Private institutions are dependent on fees paid by students and their families. The need to fill classrooms to cover costs or (often) to generate profit risks to compromise the quality of both students and instruction in the interest of financial goals.

As international qualities have become a factor in how institutions are perceived and compared, many universities are taking shortcuts, paying third parties to enhance their international dimension and produce measurable results quickly. Greater international enrollment has also become an important source of income. Allowing third-party actors to have a significant role in institutional management has opened the door to substandard, as well as unethical activity.

The purpose of higher education has also become more confused. There is a growing expectation that a university education is a guarantee of future employment and that if a university graduate is unemployed, the education provided was of poor quality.

Universities are being pressed to produce more research to improve placement in international rankings, at the same time that professors are being pushed to demonstrate impact on students through clearly defined “learning

outcomes.” Increased pressure on faculty coincides with fewer tenured or secure positions, more part-time professors, and limited infrastructure to help develop the capacity to deliver on these augmented expectations.

So, the question remains—what is university quality? Should all institutions be expected to enroll a diverse student body, insure that they all rise to a comparable level of demonstrable performance—while the faculty produces internationally indexed publications, assures learning outcomes and assures employment to all graduates, all with smaller budgets? As always, quality means different things to various people. The complex realities that surround higher education today demand to build an ever stronger case for aligning measures of quality with institutional mission. If universities are going to produce “quality,” however, it is defined: politicians, employers, and parents must criticize less and assume some responsibility for financing and otherwise supporting the necessary means to meet their expectations.

Some Nonpecuniary Challenges to Research Universities

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An answer is based on the question limited to research universities—the institutions that emphasize research, undergraduate and graduate instruction, and the arts, sciences, and professional schools. Higher education is not sustainable without schools of this type.

More than anything else, the quality of research universities depends on two closely related factors: academic freedom and shared governance, a suggestion made by me in these pages, quite recently. How are university leaders, faculty, and students selected? Does the government enforce limitations on certain types of scholarship or scholarly point of view? Who has a voice in determining curriculum and research directions? In China, the Communist Party may condemn excessive Western influence in teaching and research; in much of the Arab world fundamentalist religion prevents women from contributing their talents to society; in the United States it may be legislatures and occa-