

The Politics of Quality Assurance in Blended and Online Learning: Who are the Stakeholders



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Greetings to all the international conference participants on teaching, assessment, and learning in the digital age 2022. I am thankful to the organisers for their kind invitation to talk to you today on a topic that most of us are passionate about. International travel logistics did not allow me to be in person today at the conference, and I wish you all a very productive event. My objective in this presentation is to challenge you to think critically about quality in higher education, in general, and blended and online learning, in particular. Quality has multiple stakeholders and therefore is one of the most complex and volatile concepts applied in the education sector, especially in higher education.

I have planned this presentation in three broad sections: Higher education and quality assurance, covid-19 and the practice of higher education, and who are the stakeholders.

First, higher education and quality assurance. The understanding of the concepts of 'higher education' and 'quality in higher education' differs a lot amongst teachers and other stakeholders.

Our understanding of higher education decides the way we look at quality. The popular wisdom is that higher education is about universities that perform three crucial roles: teaching, research, and extension, and it has been there for some time now. However, higher education is not just about a place of learning, such as a university; it could happen in a college or a research centre. It is the notion of 'higher' that is important here. The Delors Commission emphasised the role of higher education as: to prepare students for research and teaching; to provide highly specialized training courses adapted to the needs of economic and social life; to be open to all to cater to the many aspects of lifelong education in the broadest sense; and to promote international cooperation through internationalization of research, technology, networking, and free movement of persons and scientific ideas (UNESCO, 1996). For some of us, it should also provide employable skills; for others, it should only promote innovation and research. It is not just one but multiple views of higher education that make it what it is.

Ronald Barnett, a contemporary thinker in higher education, states that higher education primarily does four roles:

- Higher education as the production of qualified human resources;
- Higher education as training for a research career;
- Higher education as the efficient management of teaching provision; and
- Higher education as a matter of extending life chances.

Higher education is about the quest for excellence, creativity, critical inquiry, exploration of truth, discovery, discussion, debate, and dialogue. It is about scholarship as well as the development of society.

According to Barnett, “a genuine higher education is unsettling; it is not meant to be a cozy experience. It is disturbing because, ultimately, the student comes to see that things could always be other than they are. A higher education experience is not complete unless the student realizes that no matter how much effort is put in, or how much library research, there are no final answers.” If you consider higher education as a higher educative process, you will view quality differently than if you see higher education as a mere business transaction.

Quality in higher education is all about the “iron triangle.” The biggest challenges for educational administrators worldwide are to increase access to higher education, improve quality, and reduce costs. In such a situation, the idea of quality itself is crucial. In the business and industry, quality is seen from various perspectives, such as ‘quality control’ to ‘total quality management.’ Higher education could also take a range of approaches from ‘quality as compliance’ to ‘quality as employability of graduates.’ In some disciplines, quality is also seen from the professional standard perspective.

In the book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Pirsig (1974) says, “Quality ... you know what it is, yet you don’t know what it is. But that’s self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There’s nothing to talk about it. But if you can’t say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes, it doesn’t exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist... So round and round you go spinning mental wheels, and nowhere finding any place to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it? (p. 179).”

Quality means many things to many people; it is contextual (for example, if you do not have food, for you, the quality is having food; and if you are in a five-star hotel, you may be looking at the presentation and behaviour of the staff). Some view quality as exceptionally high standards, while others consider it fitness for purpose. Yet, for some, it is value for money, while for others, it is about transformative change in the life of the stakeholders. Whatever your definition of quality, it happens by design and not by chance; and it needs common understanding by all stakeholders involved.

Quality can also be looked at from the perspective of continuous improvement, especially when dealing with human subjects, as in the case of higher education. In this approach, we look at higher education as a system and focus on inputs, processes, and outputs and how these could be improved regularly.

In such a context, quality is assured through both internal and external quality assurance approaches. Several tools and guidelines exist to achieve quality in higher education and blended and online learning. We at the Commonwealth of Learning have developed several toolkits and benchmarks to help QA agencies and higher education institutions apply internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. Whether it is about distance education, blended learning, or technology-enabled learning, there are several toolkits and standards that teachers and educational institutions can apply to ensure quality.

However, what you measure is important. In higher education institutions, three different metrics and performance indicators are commonly used for quality assurance. One, the peer-team-based review; two, survey-based international rankings; and three, citation-based research assessments.

When a peer-team-based approach to external quality assurance is used, it is essential to have high credibility. Recently, questions were raised in India about the results of some of the institutional assessments by the national accreditation agency.

We also need to understand the fallacy of the international rankings often used by universities to market and recruit students. While there is some truth about what the rankings show, there are concerns about the methodology and statistical errors in the processes. A quick analysis of the criteria adopted by some of the well-known ranking systems will show that these are based on perceptions, funding patterns, and research assessment raising questions about bias in the measurement system. When such systems are implemented nationally, they create a further divide among institutions. We need to ask questions about what makes a great educational institution? Is an institution best because it strategically recruits the best students? Is it best because of the difference it makes to the life of the students? Are we falling for the reverse of the 'garbage-in-garbage-out' trap?

The research assessment in educational institutions and the international ranking metrics uses a citation-based metric, called Impact Factor -- a tool to select journal subscriptions in libraries. Eugene Garfield, the inventor of the famous metrics Impact Factor, said, "It is one thing to use impact factors to compare journals and quite another to use them to compare authors." But universities and research funding agencies continue to use the Impact Factor, h-index, etc., to assess the quality of research, raising questions about our understanding of quality.

Retraction Watch is a website that tracks retracted published research. Its database contains over 36,000 such papers and about 268 Covid-19-related papers. Interestingly, retracted papers are also cited even after their retraction, which raises the question of the credibility of the citation metrics.

Measuring quality in higher education is magic or can be best described as statistical number crunching. The issues related to graduates' low employability, poor teaching quality, weak governance, insufficient funding, and complex regulatory norms are often ignored.

Now, let me turn to the second part of my presentation. What happened during Covid-19 and how the quality of online learning was ensured. Or, for that matter, was it a matter of concern?

Covid-19 affected over 220 million students in higher education worldwide.

The closure of educational institutions led to the rapid transition to online learning, called emergency remote teaching, which is different from the planned practice of distance and online learning. Adopting remote teaching exacerbated social injustice, inequity, and the digital divide during the pandemic.

During Covid-19, teachers used mobile for video development. They also used video streaming and webinars to reach students. This also increased the two-way interaction between students and teachers, especially for those who had access to the Internet and required bandwidth.

In a study in North America, 44% of academic administrators were more optimistic about the role of open educational resources in teaching and learning, emphasizing the need for educational content.

Many used learning management systems (LMS) for the first time. The transition was more manageable for institutions with an integrated one-stop learning platform. Nevertheless, several teachers required additional help to manage the LMS or video conference systems. The learning management systems help track students and empower the teachers to experiment with new educational approaches.

The assessment practice in higher education institutions suffered due to the lockdown, and they had to adopt alternative methods such as open book assessment, oral assessment, use of mobile apps, and proctoring systems. A study in North America revealed 64% of teachers changed assignments and exams during Covid-19, whereas 46% also dropped some assignments or exams (Johnson et al., 2021).

There was an increased adoption and acceptability of online distance education during Covid-19, and those who were asking questions about the quality of such modes of teaching and learning before the pandemic became champions of online learning overnight.

Those of us who have been working for years in technology in education know that appropriate use of technology in teaching and learning requires planning and preparation. We can use technologies in different ways to achieve our goals. Learning from, in, and with technology can be integrated into any teaching and learning practice to improve quality and increase access to quality higher education.

But did the quality of teaching and learning suffer in the technology-based delivery during Covid-19? It highlighted poor teacher capacities, inadequate technology access for students and teachers, and therefore increased inequalities, primarily resulting in poor performance for some students, also called 'learning loss.'

For example, a study at Stanford University revealed 16% of undergraduates did not have access to the Internet for half the time, and 60% of low-income students did not have a private place to study.

A study conducted at the University of Delhi on open-book examinations showed students scored significantly higher marks than in close-book examinations.

Online examinations also show a higher rate of cheating from students, so universities are now considering moving back to previous conventional practices.

There is also an increase in contract cheating, where students use a third party to prepare their assignments.

Examination as a practice of quality assurance was such a big issue during Covid-19 that Professor Jenny Davidson recommended that students be given an 'A.' She said higher education institutions could do better by easing student stress and reducing expectations to the bare minimum. She says, "Education isn't just about mastering material and improving skills. Education is about ethics. It's about learning how to be a better member of a community, whatever that community is (a classroom or a college, but also a family, a workplace, a civic polity). It's about understanding how to balance the drive toward intellectual development and mastery of new concepts and material with self-care and the sane management of responsibilities to the broader community."

So, the notion of quality keeps changing according to context. The same rigor of quality was not applied during Covid-19, and discussions about quality were considered stressful to the students and stakeholders. Nevertheless, Covid-19 also allowed teachers and educational institutions to think beyond their current practice of teaching and learning, albeit temporarily. As more technologies are used, there is also heavy dependence on similarity checking, highlighting the need for students' preparation to focus on academic integrity and academic practices.

Now let me turn to the third part of the presentation. Who are the stakeholders in the quality and academic integrity debate? Who is deciding what should be done? Are universities and academics carried away by the hype of international rankings and impact factors? What purpose do these serve? Do we have the right indicators for measuring quality? What are the roles of different stakeholders? How are they accountable? It is vital to question if we want to improve quality.

At this stage, it is essential to bring the international best practice principles, which state that

- Quality in higher education is the responsibility of the providers and their staff
- Quality is judged by how it meets the needs of society and sustains public trust
- Governments play a critical role in supporting quality
- Higher education providers and accreditation agencies must be accountable and provide evidence of quality
- Accreditation agencies are responsible for ensuring the implementation of quality processes and standards
- Quality higher education must be flexible, creative, and innovative to meet the needs of the stakeholders

From this, we derive that higher education stakeholders include students, teachers, parents, educational institutions, government and society, accreditation agencies, and employers. What are their different expectations and roles?

Let us look at the student as a stakeholder. Is the student a consumer? There is a limitation to applying the market metaphor to education. If we look at the admission process in higher education institutions, the student (customer) competes to get admission, and the educational institution (provider) often chooses its customers. Though the customer pays the fees, the output (graduation) is not guaranteed. The student has to play an active role in the process; and behaves more like an entrepreneur (investing time, effort, and money) to produce (acquire) knowledge and skills that are useful in the job market. Many a time, student satisfaction is used as the indicator of quality in many institutions. Satisfaction is related to expectation. When service delivery is below expectations, dissatisfaction increases. Is the expectation of the student genuine? Do students know what they want? What is the role of the student in online learning? Do they possess skills for self-directed learning to succeed in an online learning environment?

What is the teachers' perspective of quality? Teacher self-efficacy plays an essential role in the teaching and learning process. Their beliefs and attitude decide which tools, techniques, and learning theories and models to apply in teaching and learning. Their career stage and focus on research could also influence what they do and how they teach. Many institutions also do not prepare teachers to teach, so quality may be a factor of practice. More experienced teachers' quality would be higher than novice teachers.

What do parents think about quality? Their perception of quality is formed mainly by what psychologists call 'Social Proof.' It is influenced by the majority thinking, not necessarily rational thinking. This is where the national and international ranking influences parents and the public, creating a market for the institutions. In addition, parents are also concerned about the cost of education, graduation rate, and placement rate. Parents often fund the education in undergraduate courses, and they decide for the learners what to study and where to study.

Quality institutions are led by quality leaders. They follow systematic processes that are well-documented to help everyone contribute towards a culture of quality. Teachers and staff members are trained to deliver quality teaching, learning, and research, and the institutions' curricula reflect society's and employers' needs. Is your institution dependent on similarity-checking software instead of using authentic assessment? Are you preparing students for academic integrity vs. penalizing students for mistakes? Using the right metrics to assess quality at the institutional level is critical to optimally investing resources.

Society at large is the most significant stakeholder of quality in online and blended learning. Through the governments, society can expect higher education institutions to offer quality programmes relevant to the public. Increasing the gross enrolment ratio in higher education through distance and online learning is key to progress. Governments need to develop a regulatory framework to ensure parity of online and face-to-face programmes. And, of course, quality can't be achieved without adequate investment in infrastructure, faculty training, curricular reforms, and research.

Generally, higher education quality is ensured through national accreditation agencies and professional bodies. Such agencies also need to be accountable to ensure quality with transparency.

The higher education stakeholders must know how good and credible the accreditation process and indicators are. Who assures the quality of the accreditation agencies? Do they differentiate between different modes of teaching, and why? How are they funded? In some places, the accreditation agencies are funded through the fees collected for assessment and thus, may not remain as objective as they should be.

Private employers are the most significant source of employment for graduates. Unfortunately, they look for polished graduates who can be immediately absorbed to perform on the job without investing in preparing the graduates. The industry needs to collaborate with higher education agencies to develop skilled human resources which can be employed. Such collaboration may also help reduce the cost of education for graduates. Once the industry has a say in the curricula, it can ensure talent for growth.

Having identified the roles and expectations of different stakeholders and issues of quality in higher education and online blended learning, it is essential to highlight how to diagnose the politics of quality. I present some questions to consider within the discourse of quality:

- Who is certifying quality? What are their intentions?
- What are the quality indicators and measures of quality? Are they valid and fit for purpose?
- Are the measures equitable and promote social justice?
- Is quality a matter of convenience or standard?
- Are different modes of delivery treated with care and without bias?

When someone raises questions about online and blended learning or higher education quality, you must visualize the stakeholder perspective before making any reasoned response.

Once we are aware of the multi-stakeholder perspective of quality, it is evident that our approach to quality would not be the one-size-fits-all approach. We will look into deeper engagements while considering quality in online and blended learning environments. Such arrangements must be holistic and based on the institution's and staff's commitment, as expected in the international principles of quality.

I thank you for your kind attention.