

**Where are we going and how will we know if we've 'arrived': creating a shared vision of quality?**

**Abstract**

Within higher education the notion of quality (of teaching) often remains vague and unshared internally in part due to contested ambitions and understandings about what higher education is for and how its aims might be best achieved and supported. This paper offers one faculty's attempt to collaboratively define what quality of undergraduate teaching and learning means at a faculty level and use community-owned indicators of sound practice to evaluate teaching and learning reforms. With the aid of examples of the student and staff experience data gathered over a three year period, this paper presentation explores the data gathering and other quality enhancement processes involved and whether such processes achieved their aim of supporting, monitoring and enhancing a shared vision of quality designed to meet the needs of engineering and computing education.

**Introduction**

A 2009 OECD review report on quality teaching in Higher Education highlights the implications for institutional actors of an engagement in quality teaching. It includes the following findings:

“In many cases, institutions tend to multiply programme evaluation or training sessions for faculty though the **notion of quality** remains vague and unshared internally. A better approach is to first explore the kind of education students should gain once graduated and the types of learning outcomes the programmes should provide to ensure economic and social inclusion of students. Institutions working in this way have collaboratively defined what quality means and what the role of the faculty in the learning process could be. This reflection requires time, conviction, motivation and openness... ” (OECD, 2009, p.6)

Further:

“The dissemination of a quality culture at institutional level can be better attained through the streamline of diverse initiatives, the consolidation of bottom-up initiatives, small-sized experiments at course or programme level, replication of success stories, *using the evaluation of quality teaching as a vehicle of discussion, ...*” (OECD, 2009, p.8)

This paper outlines a faculty level initiative to use the evaluation of quality teaching as a vehicle of discussion. The first stage of this process was collaboratively defining a faculty level vision of learning and teaching, and the associated expected learning and teaching experience for both staff and students (Wilson-Medhurst, 2008 and Wilson-Medhurst et al, 2008). The resultant faculty vision was to build communities of learners engaged in employer and profession focussed activity-led education. This vision is set within a faculty whose disciplines (of engineering and computing) are charged with producing graduates who can “...tackle “real world” problems with creative yet practical results..” (Royal Academy of Engineering, 2010). This vision does still however try to attend to all the domains of curricula, those of knowing, acting and being (Barnett and Coate, 2005). To this end the associated activity-led learning pedagogy defines learning as requiring “a self directed ... process in which the individual learner, or team of learners, seek and apply knowledge, skilful practices, ... and resources (personal and physical) relevant to the activity [being undertaken].” (Wilson-Medhurst *et al.*, 2008, p.2).

The vision is also informed by student and staff feedback on their ‘most significant’ (Fink, 2003) learning experiences, as well as the benefits of student-centred ‘active learning’ approaches. These benefits include long-term retention of knowledge and better skill-oriented application of knowledge (see e.g. McCowan and Knapper, 2002; Strobel and van Barneveld, 2009). This vision is also highly sympathetic to the recent QAA draft UK quality code for higher education (QAA, 2012) which emphasises as its general principle “..The higher education provider, its staff and students are all involved in the co-production and enhancement of transformative learning, inspirational teaching and effective assessment”.

### **Defining and evaluating a shared vision of quality (of learning and teaching)**

The overarching vision having been articulated, the next step was to scope it in more detail and consider how it might be monitored, evaluated and developed i.e. with a focus on institutional improvement rather than compliance. It was identified that an overarching objective of Activity-Led Learning, the pedagogy that underpinned the faculty’s vision, was to promote student engagement with their development in all the domains of curricula. As documented in Wilson-Medhurst, 2010 indicators of engaged learning (Jones et al, 1995) formed the basis for defining what a sound undergraduate teaching and learning experience comprises, including the kind of active learning behaviours and roles that both staff and students need to adopt for successful learning. This focus on what students do and how well staff and the learning environment enables active and collaborative learning is supported by the evidence from Kuh who has also found that what students do (inside and outside the formal learning environment) during their time at university counts more in terms of desired outcomes than who they are or even where they study (Kuh, 2001).

Staff and student representatives were then involved in devising a survey instrument based on these collaboratively defined indicators (Wilson-Medhurst 2010). This was then used to gather teaching and learning experience data (on the activity-led learning curriculum reforms) from students. The data from this survey was triangulated with student feedback from open questions and staff focus group data. This data gathered over 3 successive academic years (2009/10, 2010/11, 2011/12) on all undergraduate programmes in the faculty helped to inform on-going refinements to the activity-led learning curriculum reforms. This included identifying practices that had retrograde as well as progressive impacts and making adjustments accordingly.

### **Findings and conclusions**

This paper presentation highlights the resources and expertise involved in setting up this initiative as well as examples of the learning and teaching experience data gathered and the decisions that the data helped to inform. A key learning point that emerges from the analysis is the important inter-play between pedagogy, space and staff resource as well as the extent to which curriculum innovations promote creativity and friendly (low stakes) competition in support of active and collaborative teaching and learning. The analysis shows how the monitoring and evaluation processes supported the faculty in monitoring its provision in a more responsive and nuanced way than externally ‘imposed’ indicators could allow thereby facilitating institutional improvement.

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