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Quality as Transformation: Explore Understandings at Doctoral Level Education (0099)

Abstract

Quality is a key term in the lexicon of higher education (Newton, 2002). Various definitions have been applied to it, for example, that quality is transformation (Harvey, 2007). However, both quality and transformation are elusive terms. This paper will provide an insight into how to understand quality as transformation, and will illustrate how quality and transformation are interrelated. Using data from interviews with 32 PhD supervisors and PhD students in two English universities, and the outcomes of a workshop involving staff and students, this paper reveals that quality and transformation are perceived as different concepts, despite their overlap. Transformation was associated with different forms of development, such as emotional, physical, critical, intellectual and personal, whilst quality was interpreted as instrumental, mainly related to indicators for assessment purposes.

Introduction

Quality has become a key term in the lexicon of higher education in the UK (Newton, 2002). Its definition has shifted from 'fitness for purpose' during the 1990s to 'student transformation' in the 2000s. The latter is related to the notion of 'transformative learning', which grows out of a confluence of post-60s radicalism and critical pedagogy theories (Giroux, 2001), and a new interest in adult education as part of social welfare (Mezirow, 1990, 2000). The concept of 'transformative learning' has attracted considerable research, for example, about its complex nature (Cranton, 1996; Moore, 2005), and criticisms on its limitations (Ball, 1999; Taylor, 1998). Harvey and Knight (1996) developed this concept by arguing that quality is transformation. The concept of transformation was interpreted as more than a momentous cognitive change towards rationalism, as Mezirow suggests, but a continuing process of students developing confidence, challenging assumptions, developing new understandings and acting upon them (Harvey, 2006).

Student transformation has become an agenda in the current process of quality enhancement in the UK (QAA, 2009). It emphasises student-centered learning and encourages students to take a leading role in assuring the quality of their own education. However, both transformation and quality are elusive terms. In order to provide an insight into the understanding of quality as transformation, this research explored how quality and transformation are interrelated, from the perception of both academic staff and students. Moreover, to date, most research has focused on undergraduate students. This paper seeks to explore ideas of quality as transformation among research students, and also looks at possible variations between institutions and disciplines.

Research methods

The researcher has carried out a case study of two English universities. The difference of research intensiveness was considered in choosing these universities, because PhD study is mainly research focused. One institution is an “ancient” world known university and the other is pre-1992. An interpretative research design was employed to address two research questions:

1. How can quality as transformation be applied to PhD education?
2. How are ‘quality’ and ‘transformation’ interrelated?

There were two stages in the data collection. Stage One was interviews with 16 PhD supervisors and 16 PhD students drawn from three disciplinary areas: education, physics and engineering. This allowed both academic and practice-based dimensions of learning to be explored. Stage Two was a follow-up workshop. Seven previous interviewees attended and exchanged their views of quality and transformation, and employed methods of collage making (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2009) to map these concepts. This workshop stimulated different perspectives in how to understand quality at PhD level education, not only in words but also in a visual way. Content analysis employing Nvivo software was used for data analysis.

Findings

The data of the interviews and workshop revealed that participants held different attitudes towards the concept of quality as transformation. Two interviewees perceived it as a false model, as it differed from their belief that higher education was an enabling process, instead of producing changes in students. Most interviewees felt that there was a distinction between quality and transformation, and that it was difficult to measure quality if it was transformation. However, they also expressed a view that quality as transformation could be applied to PhD education. One similarity in views was that participants said both quality and transformation could not be quantified. For example, a student interviewee in education argued that there was a danger in quantifying quality by the frequency of supervision:

I suppose if one looks at the DPhil certainly you'd not just want to look at the quantification of the education you receive, um, you look at the quality. I don't have to see my supervisor for two/three months, if I'm doing something ... I'm happy with it, until I produce whatever product I want their comments on I don't have to see them.... (PhDS10)

Of the perceived differences, one was that transformation could be unplanned, whilst quality was normally related to various indicators in real practice or to expectations, either personal or externally imposed. Another difference was that transformation could happen at any time of life, and even if it happened in the stage of PhD study, it was difficult to tell whether it was PhD-specific or not. The third distinction was that quality and transformation could be seen as two parallel processes. For example, a student interviewee in engineering felt that these two were completely unrelated in PhD study:

I think it's possible that someone could have a really good quality learning experience ... and not necessarily have a transformation. (PhD2)

A PhD supervisor in education explained that it was because quality was normally associated with output, but transformation was understood as change:

There's a difference between the output, yes, and the way you have, if you like, changed, so that you have gone from being a supervisee to the supervisor ... (PhD13)

The research data reveals that the main difficulty in measuring transformation is due to its different forms, which could be critical, intellectual, personal, physical and emotional. Therefore it is hard to standardise these for assessment purposes. Critical transformation means challenge and doing something different. It also refers to change of oneself and the world around oneself. Intellectual transformation refers to understanding about change, and is not necessarily involved with change of individuals. Personal transformation is associated with change of individuals' opinions, behaviour and attitudes. Emotional transformation is closely related to intellectual and personal transformation in that individuals would feel motivated to learn and become ready, eager and committed to make changes in study and life, and to move forward. Physical transformation can be interpreted as an age-related physical feature change.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to increase the understanding of the concept of quality as transformation. It analysed this through revealing the relationship between quality and transformation, from the perception of both PhD students and PhD supervisors at two English universities. It revealed that there was a concern about how to measure quality as transformation at the doctoral level. It suggested that transformation could take on different forms, which made it hard to relate it to quality, if quality was used for assessment purposes.