Performance and quality in higher education

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Introduction
Over the last three years, concerns about the performance and quality of higher education have risen to the top of the policy agenda. During the 1980s, the subject of both scholarly research (see for example: Lawrence and Green, 1980; Lindsay, 1982; Astin, 1985) and policy-oriented study (for example: Luke, et al., 1984 and Bourke, 1986), but it was only in the latter part of the decade that performance and quality started to receive sustained attention from policy makers.

One significant step in this process was the commissioning in 1989 of the Performance Indicators Research Group to develop a range of indicators that could be used to evaluate and compare the performance of higher education institutions. The group was given the task of identifying indicators that could be used to track the performance of higher education institutions in terms of their overall effectiveness and efficiency.

The group worked on a range of indicators, including indicators of student performance, indicators of research performance, and indicators of teaching quality. The group also developed a range of tools to help institutions measure and compare their performance, including a set of performance indicators that could be used to benchmark the performance of higher education institutions.

The group's work was influential in shaping the development of performance indicators in higher education, and it has been widely adopted by institutions and policy makers around the world.
performance and quality. In the dominant views of performance and quality, the elements of the "production" process employed are those that can be most easily quantified. Hence, popular indicators include completion rates, student-staff ratios, and publications per staff member. By de-emphasizing the exercise of judgement about what these indicators mean in educational terms, they are commonly represented as measures of quality. However, while the recent advances in defining and implementing indicators do provide a better coverage of what is measurable, they are not sufficient to constitute a new and useful tool for higher education decision making. Quantitative indicators are simply not adequate to capture adequately the many dimensions of performance and quality. In complex, multifaceted systems, sensitive indicators are at best partial measures of institutional and system performance. They focus attention on measurable and hence limited elements of performance, and make them relatively differentiable. However, they are much less significant. Unfortunately, the precise definition and quantification of indicators is essential to the identification of important improvements in comparison with more general and judgemental assessments which may in fact capture performance and quality more adequately. For example, although the Performance Indicators Report argues that its set of indicators is sufficiently comprehensive, diverse and reliable to be implemented by institutions, the Report gives little indication of how the set of indicators might be used as part of a structured evaluation of performance. The Report argues that performance indicators should "assist the institution in determining how well a particular institution or department has achieved its respective goals" (Linke, 1991: xi). However, it does not establish what higher education's goals are or what proportion of the indicators should be designated as "quality". The quality of education remains a matter of judgement. It is not clear how these indicators would be used to establish a set of indicative indicators that could be used to measure performance. The results of the study are not to be used to measure the relative quality of performance. The studies also acknowledge that there may not be the case in the suggestion that different institutions have different ideals and different performance expectations, and that therefore judgements of performance must take account of these differences in order to make a direct assessment on the basis of the relevant indicator values.

The Research Group also attempts to distance the notion of "quality" and acceptable ways of assessing it from quantifiable measures of performance. Although the indicators are based on effective quality assurance procedures and attuned to important educational aims, their assessment should nevertheless be a constructive exercise. (Linke, 1991: 81). However, this approach begs questions which are quite central to any performance assessment - how can qualitative indicators be used to assess the relative quality of performance? Moreover, while the assessment of quality against established standards may by itself, suggest the desirability of evaluative information. This includes clear statements about the limitations of the measures and judgements utilised, consultation about standards and procedures, careful selection and training of participants and having the process results and results themselves open to public scrutiny. In summary, current approaches to performance and quality tend to oversimplify higher education's role and the process of outcomes. That would be an oversimplification. Significant allowance for diverse and conflicting stakeholder judgements. Only a broad approach to performance and quality can accommodate the diversity of goals and values that characterises higher education and its stakeholders, and in particular, the conflicting judgements that result. The broadening of the national debate on quality that occurred through the involvement of the stakeholder groups provides the opportunity to advance our thinking on quality beyond a focus on performance indicators by giving adequate attention to non-quantitative information. In participating in the Government's quality agenda, the academic community should give close attention to ensuring that this opportunity is not lost. It is essential to ensure that measurement processes are not overvalued to the neglect of judgement processes, and a mechanism is developed for accommodating and making use of the widely varying judgements that result from quality assessments from different stakeholder perspectives. In preparing for the quality audits, institutions should design systematic approaches to assessing the quality of educational programs that is consistent with the broad perspective on performance and quality that has been outlined in this paper. One such approach would be in assembly a set of quantitative indicators and judgements on particular program elements made from various perspectives, and then submit to them by a stakeholder-based committee which can then make specific and overall judgements about program quality in a systematic and coherent manner.

References


