

Demonstrating quality in HE: What's being done about complex outcomes?

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Universities are in the business of promoting *complex* achievements. For example, research into the achievements that employers, internationally, value, points to ones such as:

skill at oral communication, handling one's own work load, team-working, managing others, getting to the heart of problems, critical analysis, summarising, and group problem-solving. Valued attributes included being able to work under pressure, commitment, working varied hours, dependability, imagination/creativity, getting on with people, and willingness to learn. (Yorke, 1999)

I call these complex achievements. I mean that they are not:

1. Attributable to any one learning source
2. Certain to happen
3. Precisely definable
4. Quick to grow

I suggest that there are major problems in demonstrating the quality of our work in respect of such complex achievements. To begin this argument I need to say something about the assessment of learning. I suggest that assessment is a process of judgement and that such judgements take three main forms.

1. Judgement based on measurements. The difficulty with this is that measurement theory sets out quite clearly the conditions under which something may be measured. Complex achievements do not meet these conditions. They may not therefore be measured. [It is, of course, possible to trivialise something such as 'critical thinking' until it is measurable. The problem is that what ends up being measured is no longer 'critical thinking'.]
2. Judgement based on legal reasoning. This involves a trained judge applying rules or criteria to weigh the evidence available.
3. Judgement by connoisseurship. This is close to aesthetic judgement, in which subjective and non-standard criteria are used to argue the case for a particular judgement.

The second and third forms are most appropriate to the assessment of complex achievements but they tend to be expensive; it can be hard to convey the judgements in simple and accessible forms; the public may not trust the judges or the processes; and it is difficult to make generalisations on the basis of these judgements., hard to convey simply.

It is tempting to try and get around the problems with the second and third forms by finding a proxy to measure. Let me illustrate that with reference to the set of complex achievements that is known as 'employability'. By employability I mean a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. Clearly, understood like this, we cannot measure employability. Some have been tempted to try to do so by measuring student employment rates. This is misguided. Employability is suitability for employment but suitability does not guarantee employment. Success in the graduate labour market comes from many factors, including the state of the national and regional economy. In addition, we also know that some students face systemic disadvantage in the labour market. They may be highly employable but may not get employment.

When it comes to demonstrating quality in respect of complex achievements, one set of which I have called 'employability', we cannot use measurement approaches; other approaches to judging the quality of outcomes have their own problems. So, rather than get too worried about judging complex outcomes, perhaps universities and departments could demonstrate quality by judgements of the quality of educational processes.

Of course, this assumes that there are certain teaching and learning processes that make it more likely that groups of learners will become able to show complex achievements, such as those that employers value. I argue that there are teaching and learning processes that do promote such achievements and to which

students ought, therefore, be entitled (although I cannot go into detail here). If there were such entitlements, a university or a programme would demonstrate quality in respect of promoting complex achievements *if* those entitlements were embedded in the curriculum. (In terms of employability, many universities have enhanced the quality of the co-curriculum. That is worthwhile but limited because not all students have access to the co-curriculum.)

My argument is, then, that universities and programmes can demonstrate quality in respect of complex learning outcomes by demonstrating that their programmes embed a set of curriculum entitlements: rather than assessing outcomes, this focuses on judging process quality.

Is it feasible?

1. It is certainly possible for departments, including research-intensive ones in top universities, to 'tune' their programmes to embrace entitlements that favour the development of complex achievements. This is described by Knight and Yorke (2004) in their discussion of the "Skills *plus*" project.
2. In England, the enhancing student employability co-ordination team (ESECT) produced a range of briefings (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/1434.htm>), guides (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/1433.htm>) and tools (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/1433.htm>) to help universities and departments.
3. It is also clear that the promotion of the set of complex achievements covered by the term 'employability' can be taken seriously by universities and national agencies. In Scotland it is a major concern of the national quality *enhancement* framework and of the 20 Scottish higher education institutions. In Wales, the funding council required all higher education universities to produce work experience and employability plans. In England, universities' and colleges' learning and teaching strategies usually explain ways in which the curriculum will foster employability. In the UK as a whole, the Higher Education Academy has employability as one of its main concerns in its work to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

I have argued that higher education institutions can best demonstrate the quality of their work to promote complex achievements by demonstrating process quality. I conclude by mentioning three other ways in which complex achievements may be demonstrated. First, by the portfolios of evidence students produce to back up their claims to complex achievements, such as creativity or critical thinking. Secondly, by the opinions employers have of the new graduates they employ. Thirdly, by the reflections of graduates five years after graduation.

Reference

Knight, P. T. and Yorke, M. (2004) *Learning, Curriculum and Employability*. London: Routledge/Falmer.