WHAT COUNTS AS QUALITY IS CONTESTED. QUALITY MAY MEAN different things to different people who therefore demand different quality outcomes and methods of assessing quality. The apparent is that quality is a word – a language sign. In analyzing language signs, one can discern three dimensions: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The first concerns the relations between signs. The second between the signs and their referents – what objects, actions or attributes words signify or mean. Pragmatics is about how language signs are used by a communicator or understood by a receiver. The main interest here is the two latter aspects of quality as a language sign: what does quality signify (possible referents), and how is quality used by communicators?

Semantics of Quality
There might be infinite numbers of meanings attached to quality. Today, there seems to be, by researchers on semantics, a consensus that meaning is more or less subjective, and constructed contextually. But even so we tend to think that there is some commonality in the way we use words to refer to objects, actions or attributes. Especially, when it comes to concrete signs such as a horse or a book. Abstract signs might be trickier, such as beauty, truth or quality. To give signs a fixed meaning is to define them. Common meanings of a word are displayed in dictionaries, by pointing to similar or overlapping concepts and their antonyms, and the context signs frequently occur in. These similar concepts can be called the ‘semantic network’ of a concept – a network of possible but not necessarily accurate referents, in the form of synonyms and connotations. Returning to the concept quality, the semantic network might look like the following figure:

Quality, in this network, has two main semantic aspects. Quality points to the specific features or characteristics of some phenomenon. The second is quality in the meaning of worth, what one determines as good and valuable. But quality in this sense can also point to distinctiveness or superiority of some phenomenon. A
comparative element is present, in the fact that this version of quality points to that something is better than another (has more quality). Both of these two latter meanings imply that quality is a term used to attach a positive attitude towards something, whereas the first is a term used to describe.

What version of the quality concept is emphasized has an impact of how to understand quality reviews in higher education. To determine the characteristics (qualities) of a higher education program or institute is a different process than to determine its value (quality). In the literature, the quality in quality assurance, quality assessment, quality management etc. is most often associated with the quality-as-value, not quality-as-features. This is also emphasized by the strong link between quality assurance and the concept evaluation in higher education. Evaluation is a concept that implies values, norms or criterions, in the forming of a judgement of the value of an object. Evaluation or review of quality in higher education means that based on collected information “some value judgement is given about teaching and learning in higher education” (Van Vugth 1996: 187). But on the other side, the two aspects cannot be separated. One is a precondition for the other. To determine the value of a phenomenon requires information and understanding of the characteristics of the same phenomenon. But since the value version of quality in the context of quality assurance of higher education seems to be prevalent, a further investigation of this aspect seems called for.

**Dimensions in Quality-as-Value**

As already hinted in the introduction, ideas of quality are as old as human thought, and to embrace the full history of the concept will be impossible. But the main historical antecedents are found with the Greek philosopher Plato and Aristotle. The idea of quality as value or goodness furthers the question of what is good, or more precisely, what is the essence of goodness. One can distinguish between a Platonian and an Aristotelian answer to this question, which make up a core distinction in conceptualization of quality – idealistic and pragmatic concepts of quality. The idealistic or utopian concept of quality sees quality as something that resembles the ‘ideal’, in a Platonian sense. To as much as an object is a picture of the idea of that object, the more quality it has. Quality is therefore endemic to the object. Quality cannot be measured, but can be intuitively and distinctively recognized by the ‘educated mind’. An important and more contemporary reference to this idealistic concept of quality is Robert M. Pirsig’s inquiry into quality, starting out with the following paragraph:

“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 quality. 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. 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 (Pirsig 1989: 187).”

Here, quality is a metaphysical dimension of a phenomenon, which can be recognized but never defined, or operationalized.

The pragmatic concept of quality, on the other hand, sees quality in terms of functionality, or fitness to purpose. An object, action or human has quality if it performs its function well. In Aristotle’s words, discussing goodness, and the good man, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

“If we take a flutist or a sculptor or any craftsman – in fact any class of men who have some special job or profession – we will find that his special talent and excellence comes out in that job, and this is his function ... the function of an individual and that of a good individual in the same class – a harp player, for example, and a good harp player, and so through the classes – is generically the same, except that we must add superiority in accomplishment to the function, the function of the harp player being merely to play on the harp, while the function of the good harp player is to play on it well (Thompson 1953: 25).”

Quality, in this version, is not something that is a priori defined, but is determined in relation to the object in question (Doherty 1994: 242). Quality can therefore be assessed. As such, determining
quality is not seen as function of the object, in the same sense as above, but as a function of the observation, and hence the observer. This is an important distinction. Determining quality can either be a direct function of the object, and therefore endemic to the object, or a function of the process in which a person evaluates an object. This latter sense means that quality is external to the object in question. The pragmatic concept of quality is therefore based on a subjective notion of quality, whereas the idealistic concept views quality in terms of absolutes – the ideal.

As such, the first main dimension can be drawn concerning quality; the idealistic – pragmatic dimension, and the aspects of these two conceptualizations of quality, such as internal – external, absolute – subjective, and whether or not it can be assessed. These two quality concepts run through the entire history of western philosophy. Reinterpreted over and over again, they form a core distinction among ideas of the good. But, new perspectives have been added. To further investigate the concept of quality requires a gigantic historical leap to the post-war II era.

Quality surfaced as part of the scientific management movement in Japanese industry in the 1950s, what have been labeled the ‘industrial quality movement’ (Sallis 1994: 1). Here quality is conceptualized as conformance to specifications, and seen as a part of the overall production process as prevention for variability and waste. This approach to quality, initially developed by visiting American quality ‘gurus’, such as Deming and Juran and furthered by Japanese scientists Ishikawa and Taguchi, has as the theoretical foundation statistical analysis of sources of variation combined with a human resource focus on empowerment of the worker (ibid: 7). These ideas have been labeled consecutively Total Quality Control (TQC), Total Quality Management (TQM), etc, and is seen as a holistic and management driven “means of transforming work practices” (ibid: 5). All these measures, although they might be adapted to the service sector and higher education particularly, have as the essence a view of quality related to success in the market. Quality might be transcribed as doing something (whatever necessary) in such a way that the organization remains successful and captures market shares. As such, two aspects are prominent – a focus on the production process and a focus on customer requirements. But in addition to the focus on functionality (performing well), the ultimate measure of quality is whether or not the customer will buy the product. Hence, this quality concept can be placed close to the pragmatic pole.

According to Rolf et al. (1993: 132), this constitutes the double idea of quality in trade and industry – the production perspective and the marketing perspective. In line with the latter perspective, labeling a product ‘quality’ or ‘quality approved’ has become a common marketing strategy. In the words of Brennan (1999: 224) commenting on the uses of quality in contemporary society: “as a prefix, it attaches itself to everything: from automobiles to baked beans, from plumbing to lager. The adjectival use of the term evokes the market place, the advertising hoarding, and ‘ad’ in Yellow Pages. It is part of the none-too-subtle hard sell.”

With these dimensions as a framework, the analysis will turn to the uses of the concept quality in higher education, the pragmatics of quality as a language sign. How is the concept employed in literature on higher education, and in higher education policy documents? The following framework relates to higher education only. Quality concepts in research are not included.

**Conceptualizations of Quality in ‘Use’**

An important research project in the UK in the 1990s attempted to define quality in higher education (Harvey and Green 1993). The underlying assumption in the project, and final conclusion, is that quality is relative – stakeholder relative, and thus emphasizing a subjectivist approach to quality (ibid: 10). As such, one should try to identify what conceptualizations of quality are employed in the field of higher education in UK, and by whom. Harvey and Green came up with the following taxonomy of quality concepts in UK higher education: quality as exceptional, quality as perfection or consistency, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money, and quality as transformation.
Quality as Exceptional

Under this headline three quality concepts are placed. They all have in common a notion of quality as something special (ibid: 11), but differ in terms of what the reason is for this special status. Quality is viewed as distinctiveness in the traditional Oxbridge notion of quality. Secondly, as exceeding very high standards, and thirdly, as passing as set of required standards. The traditional notion comes close to an idealistic conceptualization of quality, as it does not attempt to identify what quality is. Quality is regarded as self-evident, and cannot be determined by assessment. “The traditional view in education is that universities embody quality and thus do not need to demonstrate it. Moreover, it implies exclusivity” (ibid: 11). It confers status, and inaccessibility itself is regarded as an important condition for quality.

Quality as exceeding high standards is rather similar to the traditional notion, but is in contrast explicit about what brings about quality in higher education. But it is equally elitist, in making sure that the standards are unattainable for most institutions. The focus is on the quality of the input – the best students, the best physical equipment, and the best human resources. Quality output is regarded as a function of excellent input, and as such it is an absolutist notion of quality. This view of quality has according to Harvey and Green been predominant in the old British universities (ibid: 12).

The third version of quality as exceptional, views quality as an attribute of a product or service that has passed rigorous quality check. It is then regarded as an attribute of the assessment procedure itself. Quality is seen as conformance to externally set standards. This approach is based on an assumption that standards are objective, and can be employed across sectors, subjects and time. According to Harvey and Green this has been the overt approach of the British government, with its focus on the maintenance and enhancement of the standards in higher education.

Quality as Perfection

The second category of quality concepts focuses on perfect consistency to specifications. It is hence similar to exceeding standards, but focus on process rather than input (ibid: 15). The focus is on stability in meeting externally set specifications, and thus produces a state of zero defects. The focus is on prevention of making faults, rather than inspection. This concept is the basis in total quality management, and other management oriented quality systems. Quality as perfection is not easily adapted to higher education, or any other service for that matter, since the ability for making precise specification for the higher education process is questioned.

Quality as Fitness for Purpose

Quality as fitness for purpose is a pragmatic conceptualization of quality, where quality is seen related to the purpose of the object in question. As such, it focuses on the stated function of the object, and quality is an attribute of functionality. This is as such a relativistic quality concept. Moreover, this notion has bearing upon how one conceptualizes the function of higher education. According to Harvey and Green (ibid: 17), the literature conveys two “priorities for specifying the purpose” focusing on the customer or the provider. As such two quality definitions can be discerned under this headline; quality as fitness to customer specifications, and quality as fitness to the institution’s stated mission. The first alternative, meeting customer requirements, is problematic in higher education for at least two reasons; the customer of higher education is not easily defined, and the customer is not necessary able to specify his/hers needs. The alternative definition of quality as fitness to purpose has been emphasized in British governmental policies in the 1990s, where a quality higher education institution is one “…which clearly states its mission (or purpose) and is efficient and effective in meeting the goals which it has set itself” (ibid: 19).

Quality as Value for Money

In higher education this concept of quality equates quality with economic efficiency and accountability. According to Harvey and
Green (ibid: 22), this approach has been widely used in British higher education policy. Quality as value for money is emphasized in market-like higher education systems, based on the assumption that in a competitive environment the market itself will take care of quality. The idea is that in a competitive environment with scarce resources, the ‘surviving’ and successful institutions will be the best ones. Harvey and Green claim that the dominant policy perspective in the UK has emphasized this perspective in concordance with quality as fitness to purpose, where value for money in terms of accountability has functioned as the underlying requirement (ibid: 23).

Quality as Transformation

The last category of quality concepts is a traditionally dominant one in education. It is rooted in an idea of education as bringing about a qualitative or fundamental change in the participant (ibid: 24). According to Harvey and Green, quality as transformation has two discernable notions, enhancing the participant and empowering the participant. Quality as enhancement is comparable with notions of value added. “Value added is a ‘measure’ of quality in terms of the extent to which the educational experience enhances the knowledge, abilities and skills of the student” (ibid: 5). Quality as empowerment relates to a notion of quality as giving the participants power to influence their own transformation, in terms of decision-making and control over their own learning situation, as well as fostering critical ability and awareness in general (ibid: 25).

Comparisons of Quality Concepts

To make a brief comparison on these quality concepts, the following features of comparison can be identified. Other dimensions could probably been emphasized. Key word signifies the presented essence of the different quality concepts. Nature relates to whether or not quality is conceptualized as something absolute and objective (across sectors and time), or something relative to sectors, time, situations and observers. Phenomenon in focus signifies what object the quality concept is considered valid for, and is occupied with. This relates to a structural framework emphasizing the different levels in the higher education system. Locus is intended focusing on the ‘production chain model’; whether the quality concepts emphasize input, process, or output. Measure means how one can determine or judge that an object has quality. Improvement relates to viewpoints on what will maintain and improve the quality. Finally, the stakeholder preference is attempted tentatively identified, though based on Harvey and Green’s propositions. The comparison is displayed in table one. Quality as exceptional is here split into two categories – traditional and standards-based. The reason for this is the lack of substantial similarities. Moreover, it is important to discern them since standard-based quality concepts, along with the other concepts, can be seen as newer alternatives to the ‘traditional’ quality concept. The traditional quality concept can therefore be seen as the point of departure, or criticism, for the other alternative concepts.

Table One: Comparisons of Quality Concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Exceptional Traditional Standards</th>
<th>Perfection of zero defects</th>
<th>Fitness to purpose</th>
<th>Value for money</th>
<th>Transformation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key words</td>
<td>Special</td>
<td>Passing the bar</td>
<td>Consistency to special</td>
<td>Related to stated function</td>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Qualitative change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>Absolute</td>
<td>Absolute</td>
<td>Absolute</td>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>Relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenon in focus</td>
<td>Institute</td>
<td>Institutions/degrees</td>
<td>Units</td>
<td>Institutions/Individuals</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus</td>
<td>Input</td>
<td>Input/output</td>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Output</td>
<td>Output</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>Intutively/by expertise</td>
<td>Standardization</td>
<td>Continuous Control</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Market success</td>
<td>Value added</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Improvement | Exclusively                  | Evaluation                        | Control                   | Mission/Evaluation  | VLaizze    | Freedom/
| Stakeholder Preference | Oxbridge/Academies | Government/Employers | Government | Government | Academics/students |
What are the main conclusions to be drawn from this comparison? First, the traditional, standards-based, and zero-defects concepts of quality operate with a more or less absolutist notion of quality, in the sense that quality is considered as a reflection of an ideal – the ideal higher education. Either an ideal in the Platonian sense – a metaphysical reality, or a priori defined standard of good education. Quality as perfection also seems to operate with the same principle; that it is possible to define the perfect educational process and all deviations from this specification is to be considered as defects. The focus (phenomena and locus) of the quality concepts vary, ranging from a holistic focus as in the traditional and fitness for purpose concepts of quality, to the more individually oriented concepts. It is interesting to note that the British government seems to emphasize the institutional output in its notion of quality. The academics tend to favor notions of quality that focus on the level of resources as well as the academic process. Quality can by this stakeholder-group only be determined by expertise, whereas the government focuses on assessment pared with market measures. Last, notions of what will improve the quality are of importance, ranging from control aspects to freedom. Various notions of control can be seen; control of accessibility, control of the process, or output control. Freedom varies from a laissez-faire notion of self-regulation, to personal freedom for the individual.

How do these quality concepts in use relate to the philosophical framework presented above? If one discern two main dimensions: the idealistic – pragmatic dimension, and the objective-subjective (relative) dimension, the categories can be displayed as the following figure.

![Figure: Philosophical framework of quality concepts](image)

As a conclusion of this comparison of concepts in use in British higher education, the most visible difference appears to be between what the academics think of as a quality higher education, and what the British government emphasized in higher education policy documents.

### Bibliography


NOTES FOR THE CONTRIBUTORS

Scholarly manuscripts that fall within the aims and scope of Asian Affairs will be accepted. Interdisciplinary, international, and/or intercultural studies are preferred. The author should submit two copies of the manuscript. The manuscript must be typewritten, double-spaced on one side of white paper. Pages should be numbered consecutively. A quotation that will run more than fifty words should be off as a single spaced, double-indented paragraph. Changes and additions to quotation should be identified by bracketing; ellipses (...) should be used to identity omissions; emphasis added should also be indicated. In matters of style, the manuscript should follow The MLA Style Sheet. The following are given as guidelines for contributors:

Tables: Tables should be given separately, making their position in the manuscript, using such numbers as Table - 1, Table - 2, etc. with appropriate heading.

Illustrations, Graphs, Charts: These should be drawn in deep black ink on thick drawing paper clearly and legibly within printing area with appropriate legends.

Endnotes: These should be numbered consecutively and placed at the end of the manuscript.

Samples Entries


The editor retains the right to edit the article to make it consistent with the style of the journal.