

Barnett (Ronald) *Improving Higher Education: Total Quality Care*, Buckingham, SRHE, Open University Press, 1992. 240 pp. ISBN 0-335-09984-X

Across the Western world, quality assessment procedures are moving along the apparently opposite approaches. On the one hand, the need for increased accountability and assessment of quality is carried out by means of externally generated, mostly uniform standards. On the other hand, the need for more institutional initiative and autonomy suggests internal institution-specific criteria.

Barnett presents himself as a passionate opponent of the external approach which he associates with instrumentalism, with numbers on input and output, and with performance indicators. Such an approach takes as its point of departure the values and interest of the external world, both as to the purposes of higher education and as to the means by which its quality ought to be assessed and improved.

Against this, Barnett argues that higher education is an educative process which required principally another approach to quality. His aim is to uncover any set of principles basic to quality that is grounded in the essential character of higher education. Key questions are: What are we trying to offer students in higher education? How would we know whether what we are offering is of high quality? How might we improve the quality of what is offered?

Subsequent chapters are devoted to outlining the problem of quality assessment. Based on a conception of higher education in which the development of the individual student's autonomy is one of the central aspects, Barnett rejects quantitative methods of appraisal, any overriding criteria or 'golden' standards by which performance can be judged and summative forms of evaluation. Even the question whether quality can be managed is negatively answered, although it is acknowledged that managers can be involved in efforts to improve quality (management *for* rather than *of* quality). Drawing from the work of Habermas, Barnett argues that if constraint is exercised on the conversations in which academics are engaged, the free discourse of the academic community is surrendered. Were the academics' activities to be managed by someone else, the personal involvement in the communication would be put at risk; and with it, the essence of the quality of the academic community.

At this point, the reader is anxious to hear how such an attitude can be attained. To what extent and under what conditions will staff be prepared to reflect seriously about the educational character of what they are doing, prepared to be self-critical and to take necessary remedial actions? What happens inside the black box of the institutional space in which activities are undertaken oriented towards changing students in various ways? In this process, much responsibility is attached to individual members of the faculty, to individual departments and not the least to institutions. For institutions should be assessed for the seriousness which they attach to the quality of teaching.

Barnett adopts for a moment indicators which he earlier denounced because these are defined external to higher education, such as non-completion rates and checklists on institutional efficiency, value-added, degree results, graduate destinations and the

like. But he hastens to say that any specification is problematic and that numerical indicators cannot provide us with the firmness and robustness they may seem to supply. Only those indicators that tell more about an institution's educational performance are legitimate.

For Barnett, quality assessment in the black box is ultimately the result of an institutional culture; not so much a matter of total quality management, but rather one of total quality care, understood as an attempt, a strategy, to produce an institution-wide commitment to quality assurance. Each professional is seized of his or her responsibilities and takes care of all his or her own professional efforts. The use of peer review on the teaching side is considered as legitimate and valuable in maintaining the quality of an institution's courses, including its teaching.

Much of what Barnett is saying is not new in the debate on quality in higher education, but it seems necessary to repeat it in a time that governments are putting much effort in collecting data which presumably indicate a degree of quality and – how naive – have the purpose to connect these with funding. Although the book has clearly been written against the background of British higher education, it would have gained in strength if current practices had been taken into account. For example: to what extent is the Academic Audit Unit developing approaches to quality assessments that are actually counterproductive to the educational process? How is the current effort of the Higher Education Funding Council to put more emphasis on self-assessment procedures to be judged? In continental Europe, much effort is put into developing a constructive balance between internal and external evaluation. Indicators and previous prepared checklists function as *aides-mémoire* in environments that are primarily characterized by dialogue between the parties involved.

Barnett would not oppose such a view, but he continues to stress that 'the most valuable aspects of teaching, broadly considered, are not easily susceptible to observation and assessment by a third party, whether an external inspector or even an internal colleague' (p. 125). Elsewhere, he states that 'a rule-governed approach to maintaining quality or to evaluating the quality of work in an institution is misguided' (p. 120). He advocates that the internal members of an institution review what they are about for themselves as part of the internal culture of the institution. It would have been interesting to investigate whether this position holds in the light of the question of the extent the highly-praised teaching quality of the polytechnics is precisely due to the work of the former Council for National Academic Awards. Although he does not say that 'anything goes' – and he provides some in themselves sensible suggestions institutions can use to improve teaching quality – it remains unclear how and under what conditions institutions are prepared and motivated to be involved in quality assurance.

His faith in a free discourse extends protection to the academic community leading to introversion and solipsism. Ignoring the sociological fact that institutions consist of various groups with contrasting and even competing agendas, as well as the fact that an enormous variety of activities with different underlying purposes and standards are characteristic in modern institutions of higher education, Barnett attempts continuously to create an ideal-type of what the quality of education should be.

The final chapters are devoted to quality at the level of the curriculum and student experience. Issues like (vocational) competence, modes of communication, professional action, inter-disciplinarity, reflective practitioner and student learning are discussed with little reference to concrete situations. Much of what he says here makes sense, though stated in a very pedantic way, a style of writing which characterizes the book as a whole. Also the linguistic usage is quite excessive.

The book is worthwhile to read, not for those expecting straightforward answers, but for those who want to reflect more on what they are doing in their daily activities regarding quality assurance.

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