Conceptions of quality and value in Higher Education: A comparative study of prospective employers and academic staff

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Introduction

This research is part of a larger study of value in Higher Education (HE). The purpose of this paper is to explore how quality and value in Higher Education (HE) are related by investigating the experiences of members of two important stakeholder groups, prospective employers of business graduates and academic staff.

Background

Previous research has suggested that while value is the currency of stakeholders in the HE domain it remains inadequately understood and defined (Francis et al., 2014, Fisher et al., 2017). As HE has moved towards student-centric education, how key stakeholders value university offerings has become increasingly important. Also important is the perceived quality of offerings with HE institutions entering the market to produce and provide knowledge that has come to be regarded as a commodity (Kauppinen, 2014). In the commodified marketplace quality has gained increasing importance with universities being ranked, offerings reviewed and outcomes such as graduate salaries compared (e.g. ARWU, 2019, Sunday Times, 2021).
The relationship between quality and value has been the focus of recent research (e.g. Baishya and Kakati, 2019, Dwaikat, 2021, Pencarelli et al., 2013), however the links remain unclear. With links to the development, delivery, assessment and evaluation of HE programmes it is important that the relationship between quality and value should be explored and understood.

Research Approach

The research uses a phenomenographic approach to construct conceptions of the links between value and quality from members of two stakeholder groups, representing stakeholders from the supply and demand sides of HE. Phenomenography is an approach that focusses on the qualitatively different ways actors experience phenomena in their lifeworld (Marton, 1986). Recorded and transcribed interviews are used to collect data from 10 members of each group (Trigwell and Prosser, 1997). Data are collected from stakeholders at a UK university. Interviews are analysed using the phenomenographic method with additional support from Wittgenstein’s look-think-act steps to aid sensemaking and avoid hasty generalisations (Wittgenstein, 2000, Fisher et al., 2016). Conceptions of quality and value are compared between stakeholder groups.

Conclusions/Implications

Conceptions of quality and value were found to differ between the two stakeholder groups. Conceptions experienced by members of the prospective employer group were: 1) Value is a precursor to quality in HE; 2) Meeting standards create value that leads to quality in HE; and 3) Value created by HE enhances quality for employers. Conceptions experienced and understood by the academic staff group were: 1) Quality is selling educational programmes to franchise partners, it’s about income not value; 2) Value is linked to the customer, it’s ‘pulled’ by the customer. Quality is more of an internal thing; and 3) Quality is conformance, which has nothing to do with delivery of value. In summary, employers expressed a clear link between quality and value. For employers, conceptions of quality and value suggest that value is an antecedent of quality. Also, in some instances value created by HE leads to quality at the employer level. For academic staff the link between quality and value is less clear, with quality relating to conformance (expressed as one academic as ‘ticking boxes’) and related to income rather than value. In some cases, academic staff viewed value as a response to the customer, with value being ‘pulled’ by the customer. All conceptions of academic staff suggested that quality is practiced mainly at the university level and is only tangentially associated with value.
Understanding stakeholders’ conceptions of the qualitatively different ways in which quality and value are related adds to a growing literature on the topic. The research provides empirical understanding of how quality and value in HE are linked. The methodology and methods provide a different perspective of the ways quality and value are understood as idiosyncratic and experiential through the lens of stakeholders.
In addition to contributing to discipline knowledge the findings provide insights that inform HE practice. Understanding differences in the conceptions of quality and value, as experienced by key stakeholder groups in the supply of and demand for HE, has implications for the design, delivery and assessment of educational programmes. The findings also inform current debates about value in HE, for example the recent HEPI (2021) webinar on value for money in HE.