Developing a Holistic Model for Quality in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT
Attempts to apply the Quality Management models from industry into higher education have not been successful. There is a rationale for separately addressing the service and education functions with appropriate sets of criteria. TQM is an appropriate model for the former-service. For the latter, a number of models of excellence centered on learning are reviewed. The effectiveness of any composite model in addressing the multifarious elements of higher education is dependent on the organisational culture. The typical current culture is one of bureaucratic nature, prone to conflict. It is argued that in the current literature an ideal organisation behaviour which addresses the core values of higher education are the Learning Communities concepts. Such a Holistic Model for Quality in Higher Education can serve as the ideal to address the service, education and implementation aspects synergistically.

Keywords: Quality in Higher Education, TQM and Learning Communities.

1.0 Introduction:
Quality in higher education – how to enhance it and how to evaluate it – has been placed squarely on the contemporary agenda in higher education. The literature from late 1980s suggest considerable interest in the higher education sector in industrially popular ‘Total Quality Management (TQM)’ model as alternative methodology/philosophy for governance. The theoretical compatibility of the measures to higher education raised a considerable controversy (Harvey 1995; Bensimon, 1995). Many Universities began implementing Total Quality strategies under an administrative leadership and shied away from classroom and curriculum issues (Brigham 1993). Despite the support of the funding bodies for implementation of TQM, the survey by Birnbaum and Deshotels (1999) of 469 higher education institutions concluded that the adoption of TQM in the academy is both a ‘myth and illusion’. Vazzana et al (2000) in a survey involving 243 business schools concluded that few are using TQM to manage core learning processes.

Based on the above discussions, the authors would hypothesise that the approach reported so far in the literature of attempting to implement TQM model as practiced in industry across all the operations of a university is flawed in view of its tenuous fit with the core operation: teaching and learning. The other extreme of ignoring the currently accumulated experience in implementing quality management models in industry, would be equally unwise as a substantial segment of university’s function is amenable to service quality management systems. Therefore the only logical conclusion one can arrive at in relation to a model for quality management in higher education is that it would have to be more holistic to flexibly address service and pedagogical aspects uniquely.

In developing a holistic model for quality management for higher education one has to make a clear distinction between two types of processes:
- The services to the student body from academic (eg. enrolment, library) and general administrative functions (eg. Cafeterias and recreation). To such service areas TQM is an appropriate model, similar to any other service environment eg. banking or travel.
- The teaching and Learning functions (relating to both education and research). In recent educational research literature a number of models for academic quality management have been proposed, a synthesis of which will richly address this area.

Such an approach would contrast with those reported so far in the literature of attempting to implement a total quality management model selectively across the operations of a university - which fundamentally defeats the purpose of ’totality’. Lack of rationale” for such poorly developed
approaches have been at the root of many of the controversies referred to earlier. In any composite model considered, based on these two distinctive areas of higher education, TQM addressing the service areas should be meshed seamlessly with the model addressing the core areas of teaching and learning. Such a synthesis, when appropriately implemented, would then become a Holistic Model for Quality Management in Higher Education. The paper will make an attempt to develop a basis for such a model.

2.0 Models emphasising quality management in teaching and learning:

At a theoretical level, from time to time, there have been a number of attempts at a re-examination of the fundamental educational processes and a number of new models have been proposed for educational quality management in universities. While it would be a major effort to fully analyse all the significant publications in the area, some of the well-articulated models proposed in the recent literature are briefly described below. Their organisational implications for universities will be examined subsequently.

2.1 Transformative Model:

Harvey and Knight (1996, ch. 1) present ‘transformation’ as the most appropriate learning-oriented approach to quality. The emphasis is on ‘enhancing participants’, ‘adding value’ to their capability and ultimately ‘empowering’ them.

There is a ‘clear focus’ on ‘student experience’. Transformative learning requires a transparent process, which is integrated, contributing to a rich and relevant ‘Total Student Experience’. Transparency means openness about the aims, processes and method of attainment of learning by the student. Integration means that such experiences are linked together into a cohesive whole (ch. 2).

Learning is based on a dialogue between participant and providers. Dialogue involves the discussions between learners and teachers about the nature, scope and style of their learning. Dialogue also requires a dynamic exchange among the teachers about the teaching and learning process. Overall, the authors conclude that transformative approach is really about ‘a responsive process that is explicit, integrated and based on a dialogue’ (pp 40-41).

2.2 An Engagement Model of Program Quality:

Haworth and Conrad (1997) developed an ‘Engagement Theory’ of program quality ‘organised around (the) central idea (of) student, faculty (academics) and administrative engagement in teaching and learning’ (pp xii). Based upon an extensive interview of persons involved in Higher Education, the authors define ‘high quality programs as those which contribute to the learning experiences for students that have positive effects on their growth and development’ (pp xii). The theory maintains that in high quality programs the principal stakeholders – academics, students and administrators – invest in five separate clusters of program attributes, each of which contributes to enriching the learning experiences for students.

- **Cluster 1: Diverse and Engaged Participants:**
  - Faculty (academics), Students and Leaders.

- **Cluster 2: Participatory cultures:**
  - Shared program direction,
  - Community of learners, and
  - Risk taking environments.

- **Cluster 3: Interactive Teaching and learning:**
  - Critical dialogue,
  - Integrative Learning,
  - Mentoring,
  - Cooperative Peer learning, and
  - Out of Class activities.
Cluster 4: Connected Program Requirements
Planned Breadth and Depth of Coursework, Professional Residency, and Tangible Product.

Cluster 5: Adequate Resources
Support for Students, Faculty and Basic Infrastructure.

In broad terms, the engagement theory advances a new perspective on program quality management that:
- Emphasises student learning as the primary purpose of higher education,
- Highlights the pivotal role that people – primarily the academics, administrators and students – play, and
- Provides a template for assessing quality.

2.3 University of Learning Model:
In the model, Bowden and Marton (1998) examine the organisational characteristics of Higher Education from a pedagogical perspective. They postulate that in all the commonly perceived functions of a university: teaching, research or community involvement, the core process is one of learning (at different levels). Hence they argue that ‘quality in a university context has a lot to do with the quality of learning and the quality of learning has a lot to do with qualities of different ways of seeing’ (pp 219), when the learner ‘widens the range possibilities of seeing the same thing’. The learners’ ‘world grows richer and.. (has) more options for ..actions’. They begin to experience simultaneously the range of variation of the aspects (or dimensions) of the phenomenon. They begin to discern the aspects by differentiating among them to focus on the ‘one most relevant to the situation. Without variation there is no discernment’ (pp 7).

The authors examine the organisational characteristics conducive to quality of its processes and derive the attributes of a ‘university of learning’. It centres around membership of intersecting networks, including an active collaboration among academics in program teams. They commit themselves to a deep exploration of the subject matter from the learners’ perspective to develop alternative patterns of understanding. There is a synergistic involvement in developing, along with colleagues, a holistic view of student capabilities intended to be developed by the program experience. They develop a collective consciousness of what is common and what is complementary. They explore the potential in the students for ‘discerning relevant aspects of variations’. Thus, large interdependent groups of academics and administrators working in concert create the foundation of a ‘University of Learning’.

2.4 A Model for a Responsive University:
Tierney (1998) collated the views of a number of leading authors on ‘Restructuring for High Performance’, which together formed a model for excellence - ‘a Responsive University’. The model is based on the premise that ‘the public..will judge the university in terms of the quality of their relationships… and the quality of the outcomes..’. ‘Quality relationships (are) characterized by mutuality and equality’. Therefore ‘to survive and thrive..universities will have to be responsive’ and ‘be service oriented’ (p163). The emphasis is on development of new internal relationships through communication and partnerships as well as ‘new external relationships including social partnerships with communities’.

The academic staff should ‘regularly review and take into account shifts in student demand, resource allocations, departmental goals and the evolving mission of the institution’ (p165). The staff must develop a commitment to annual performance contracts, which can determine ‘the extent to which and the ways in which the institution will be a responsive one.

External relationships are important for enhancing quality with ‘joint ventures across academic units and between institutions’. ‘Partnerships with government will be necessary to transform institutional performance so that it is better aligned with public purposes’. ‘With increasing
emphasis on relationships and outcomes …the university …will be more a network than a place’ (p170).

3.0 Developing a generic model for Quality Management in Teaching and Learning (QMTL)

While each model cited in the previous section has its own unique perspective on educational quality in a university, it is necessary to examine them more closely to see if they can be described by a generic model for quality management. At the outset, two focal points - issues that have received a common emphasis - seem to emerge from the models: student learning and a dynamic collaboration around it.

All the models have a common thrust on student learning experience, when one makes judgements about quality. The ‘Transformative Model’ of Harvey and Knight (1996) requires quality policies to result in ‘a ‘clear focus’ on ‘student experience’. The ‘Engagement Model’ of Haworth and Conrad (1997) maintains that the clusters of program attributes should contribute to enriching the learning experiences for students. In the ‘University of Learning’ model, Bowden and Marton (1998) argue that quality in university context relates strongly to quality of learning. Tierney (1998) sees the responsiveness of a university to be coming from meeting the learning needs of students.

All the above models also emphasise collaboration at the education delivery level. The ‘Transformative Model’, requires the learning experience to be based on a dialogue between the learners and teachers about the nature, scope and style of their learning, and also among the teachers about the teaching and learning process. The ‘Engagement Model’ foresees teaching and learning to be based on critical dialogue, mentoring and cooperative peer learning. The ‘University of Learning’ model highlights a synergistic involvement of academics in a course/ research team, developing a holistic view of student competencies and a collective consciousness of commonalities and complementarities. The ‘Responsive University’ model emphasises communication, which requires new relationships and partnerships both internally and externally.

Therefore, given the common foci, it would be possible to develop a generic quality management model addressing a university’s educational process. Some broad features are indicated below:

- **Basis for Quality Management**: All the models clearly subscribe to the ‘Transformative’ approach to quality with an emphasis on ‘enhancing participants’. Harvey and Knight (1996; pp 2) identify this by a range of interactions at the teaching interface. Haworth and Conrad (1997) seem to present the notion of enhancement as ‘growth and development’ of students identified by a range of characteristics at the teaching program design and delivery levels (cluster 3). Whereas Bowden and Marton (1998) seem to give a subtle pedagogic interpretation of enhancement as ability in learners to ‘discern relevant aspects of variation’. Identifying this is to be the key focus of the course teams. In the descriptions of ‘Responsive University’ enhancement seems to be subsumed within the notions ‘quality of outcomes’ when they are ‘student centred’ (Tierney,1998; pp 163). From a quality assurance point of view, this should provide a rich range of elements for identifying as evidence for performance.

- **Implementing the model**: Central to an effective ‘Transformation Model’ as described by Harvey and Knight (1996, pp118) is ‘...a quality system that drives (continuous) improvement from the staff-student interface’ governed by ‘an academic professionalism that embraces openness, dialogue and transparency’. The senior management’s role is to ‘encourage and ensure’ it ‘whilst developing a sensitive but effective external monitoring process’. The Engagement Theory of Haworth and Conrad (1997, ch. 3) seems to fit well within the broad framework of the ‘Transformation Model’ as it elaborates and categorises the interactions at this interface among ‘students, faculty (academics) and administrators’ in enriching the learning experience for the students’. In the ‘University of Learning’ (Bowden and Marton, 1998) model, the learning experience, considered as the ‘ability to discern the relevant
aspects of variation’, is brought about by the synergistic involvement of academics in intersecting networks of program and research teams (Bowden et al., 2000). The ‘Responsive University Model’ (Tierney, 1998, Conclusion) adds yet another dimension to this notion of transformation – the nature of its social context, at student, community and national levels. Thus at the implementation level, there is a clear complementarity among the models to develop a rich picture of the nature of the required actions.

Overall the features of a Generic Model addressing the Quality Management in Teaching and Learning (QMTL), based on preliminary set of models chosen above, can be summarised as follows:

- A clear focus on ‘transformation’ of the learners and
- A synergistic collaboration at the learning interface.

Thus a clear basis for the specification of the features of the Generic Model for Quality Management in Teaching and Learning (QMTL) in higher education seems to be emerging.

As more studies are made into educational research, the chances are that features of the model would be amplified and clarified.

4.0 Articulation between Total Quality Management (TQM) and Quality Management in Teaching and Learning (QMTL) models

The need for distinct approaches to the service and teaching areas of higher education proposed is based on their distinctiveness of emphasis. In the service areas student is clearly the customer and is the focus of all processes. In the teaching and research function students play the key role of a participant and the focus is on the attribute of their learning, as determined by:

- The global parameters of content and resources governing the curriculum design, and
- The subtle parameters of delivery and assessment governing the ‘enhancement’ of the learner.

TQM addresses the service areas, focussing on the products of delivery by measuring, monitoring and continuously improving the processes. QMTL, on the other hand, focuses on the empowerment of the course team across all the boundaries to facilitate a dialogue centred on learning. The techniques of TQM are well understood and documented in the industry practice, whereas those of QMTL are rooted in the educational research literature, illustrated initially on the basis of a synthesis of the four models discussed above.

In spite of the structural difference in the scope of the two models, there is a substantial commonality of requirements in the implementation phase. First of all, their focus on students albeit to differing levels of subtlety. Secondly, at the operational level, collaboration is a key requirement in both the models although the fields of interaction may vary to a large extent. Both the models also require a visible commitment and support from the senior management to effectively continue to flourish. Thus, by and large, the pattern of interaction and governance required for both the approaches is the same. Hence the development of a comprehensive model covering the education and service delivery aspects on the campus should work out to be reasonably mutually compatible.

5.0 An Approach to the Issue of organisational culture:

An important challenge is how to develop a culture conducive to the adoption of the models. Newby (1999), in examining the TQM model concluded that ‘over and above ... concerns with quality in higher education, is the importance of management structure and style...’. In other words, while all the models portray a rich picture of the ideals of quality in the operation of a university, they should also spell out the parameters of organisation behaviour to serve as a broad basis for implementation. This would entail a need for a fundamental re-examination of management methodologies to restore the original governing principle enshrined in higher education: ‘collegialism’ (Harvey, 1995b) which should ideally manifest itself as shared decision making, upholding of integrity and commitment to knowledge.
A more contemporary theory of organisation behaviour, which would bring universities close to the ideals of ‘collegialism’, is that of ‘learning organisation’ as expounded by Argyris (1978) and Senge (1990). It seems to provide a comprehensive basis for developing a collegial interaction in organisational processes as espoused by the quality management models discussed earlier. According to Senge typically an organisation changes from a ‘controlling’ to a learning’ one by people mastering certain (five) disciplines. They are personal disciplines relating to how people think, what they want and how they relate to each other. As the organisation acquires the disciplines, culture in the organisation transforms by consistently empowering the employees. Through learning, the organisation attains a capacity to create its future (Senge, 1990, ch1, pt1). ‘What university could refuse to embrace that as an ideal?’ wonders Piper (1996).

In the more recent literature, the organisational learning concepts are being re-interpreted in terms of Boyer’s (1987) description of an ideal community in higher education as: purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring and celebrative. There is a copious stream of publications presenting a synthesis of ‘organisational learning’ and the ‘ideal community characteristics’ as basis for the development of ‘learning communities’ in the campus (eg. Lenning and Ebbers, 1999; Smith & McCann, 2001; Lieberman & Wehlburg, 2001). The authors would postulate that organisation behaviour norms based on ‘learning communities’ are fundamental prerequisites for implementing a quality management model in higher education.

6.0 Conclusion

Overall, the quality management model implemented on the principles of a ‘learning communities’ should provide a balanced approach among the ideals of the educational, service and behavioural excellence ethos in Higher Education. Such a model can be termed a Holistic Model. As universities begin to take the initial steps towards the framework for a model for quality, a pool of experience begins to build upon which effort can be focussed to critically explore and clarify the details and enhance the model, as opposed to debating and challenging the very validity of the models, as has been the case so far. Thus, a Holistic Model for Quality Management in Higher Education has the potential for building a synergy between educational and organisational theories in contrast to the dichotomy engendered in the models advocated so far.

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Glossary

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