Measuring the Quality of Post-Secondary Education: Concepts, Current Practices and a Strategic Plan

Ross Finnie
Queen's University*

And

Alex Usher
Educational Policy Institute[**]

April 2005

* The School of Policy Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, ON, Canada K7L 3N6
Tel.: 613-533-6000, ext.74219, ref@post.queensu.ca
** Educational Policy Institute (Canadian Office), 1701-77 Bloor St. W, Toronto, ON, M5S 1M2
Tel: 416-848-0237, ausher@educationalpolicy.org

Research Report W|28 – Work Network is available at
http://www.cprn.org or on request at (613) 567-7500

Executive Summary

This paper addresses the issue of the measurement of "quality" in post-secondary education. It begins by providing a critical examination of current practices in quality measurement in Canada and around the world. It then proposes a conceptual framework to guide thinking about the relevant issues. This is followed by a discussion of the general kinds of data needed to estimate the relationships in question. We then suggest what might be done with existing data sources in the short-run to undertake various quality measurement exercises, and what a longer-run plan might look like. We also suggest alternative approaches to measuring and promoting quality which are less founded on rigorous empirical exercises and more focussed on qualitatively-oriented evaluation procedures which could be implemented almost immediately.

We consciously choose not to join the debate over what the specific purposes of the PSE system should be, or what particular factors are associated with a better or lower quality education. Instead, we concentrate on developing a general approach for addressing these issues and proposing a broad analytical tool to help identify the factors that limit or contribute to better PSE outcomes. This analytical tool can be used in different ways by different users.

The conceptual framework is simple, capturing the PSE experience as a story of inputs and outputs whose narrative flows like this:

- *Beginning Characteristics* – the characteristics and abilities of incoming students that affect the quality of their educational experience and the outcomes.

- *Learning Inputs* – the institutional financial resources, material inputs and the organization of those resources which thus comprise the determinants and characteristics of individuals' learning experiences; all are at least potentially controllable and thus amenable to change, improvement, and policy initiatives at various levels.

- *Learning Outputs* – the "skill sets" or any other attributes of graduates arising from their educational experiences that help determine final outcomes.

- *Final Outcomes* – the more specific "ultimate ends" to which the educational system may contribute – everything from employment, income and job satisfaction, to civic participation and continued education.

The notion of quality we propose thus focuses on the value-added of the educational experience. The 'higher quality experiences' are those that result in superior learning outcomes, and better final outcomes. And in the end, identifying the relevant value-added relationships of interest is an empirical exercise, since sitting and thinking about what quality is will not tell us what really matters in practice – and what matters in different ways in different situations.

We discuss, with the help of this framework, the advantages and limitations of current "quality measurement" exercises, from the annual Maclean's university issue to the self-evaluation exercises undertaken by institutions. Each of these carves out a limited part of the overall quality assessment framework and generally undertakes the 'estimation' in a less-than-ideal manner in

terms of the data employed (many of them ignore students' beginning characteristics, for example), how those data are manipulated, the spin put on the findings, and in other respects.

With this framework in hand, we then review the data sources currently available and find significant gaps in terms of the requirements pointed to by our framework. Even so, enough data are currently available to estimate many of the empirical relationships the model suggests and thereby advance the cause of measuring educational quality.

For the longer term, we recommend further data collection to fill the gaps. The goal is a database that is longitudinal, with full sets of information on beginning characteristics, inputs, learning outcomes and final outcomes – these (not surprisingly) matching the elements of our conceptual model.

There is no 'silver bullet' in looking at educational quality. There are no simple measures you can point to and say "Yes, there is quality. Let's have some more of it." What we hope we have produced here is, instead, a framework for thinking about this important and difficult issue in an intelligent fashion, and some specific, practical suggestions for how we can move towards doing a better job of measuring quality in both the short- and longer-run. With this, the cause of making for a better, more accountable post-secondary education system should be advanced more than with all the smoke, mirrors, and hot-headed debates that have typically characterised 'the measurement of quality' to date.