Connotation and Evaluation of Quality of Higher Education

Lian-Sen WANG

Institute of Higher Education, Shandong Women's University, Jinan, P.R. China, 250300
School of Tourism, Shandong Women's University, Jinan, P.R. China, 250300
Research Center for Higher Education, Shandong University, Jinan, P.R. China, 250100
Email: liansen@sdu.edu.cn

Key words: Higher education quality, Quality evaluation, Students’ engagement

Abstract. Quality is the degree of a set of inherent characteristics to satisfy requirements. The quality of higher education means that whether the property of higher education can satisfy the requirements of higher education subjects and the satisfaction degree. From the external view, it is a value judgment that can be accepted by the public; from the internal view, it is also a result reached by internal attributes of the higher education. For the satisfaction of higher education to requirements of users, because users are different, requirements are various and the requirements have variability, the satisfaction of requirements is highly subjective, which make it difficult to make a unified quantitative standard for quality, especially the development of nonintellectual factors like consciousness and emotions, is lack of ‘standard’ and it is hard to be exactly measured or expressed; while the mastering of some professional knowledge and application skills can be directly or indirectly measured or judged. Students’ engagement into study should highly be focused on when measuring the quality of higher education.

“Quality of education is the essential question of development of higher education”[1]. With the gradual establishment of the socialist market economy system of China, new requirements were put forward to higher education and the quality of education also further draws the wide attentions of all sectors of the society. Some scholars indicated long ago that, “It is still the central issue of the reform and development of current higher education institutions to continually improve the education quality of HEIs adapting to the development of socialist market economy.”[2]

What Is Quality?

Quality is possessed by any entities. This entity can be a product and can also be an activity, a process, an organization, a system or any combinations of the aforementioned items, while the product among which, can be in four kinds including service (like transportation), hardware (like machine parts), software (like computer programs or dictionaries) and processing materials (like lubricating oils). Therefore, quality has universality and it widely exists in various fields of practice activities of the human society.[3] Throughout the relevant literatures, some organizations “for standardization” and scholars commonly considered that “quality” is not only in objective category (from the perspective of production), but also in subjective category (from the perspective of consumption),that is, the meaning of “quality” is “the degree of a set of inherent characteristics to satisfy requirements”. As for this, some scholar made concrete analysis that as the inherent regularity of entities, the specific embodiments of quality are a set of characteristics of entities and quality is the total of the inherent characteristics and qualities of entities. For example, products in the category of service generally have functionality, economy, security, timeliness, comfort and civilization; products in the categories of hardware and processing materials generally have performance, credibility, security, adaptability, economy and timeliness; while products in the category of software mainly have functionality, usability, portability, reliability, confidentiality and economy. Peculiar to entities, this inherent regularity is the characteristics making the entity different from other entities and it is the objective attribute of objects. From the other point of view, as the inherent characteristics of entities, quality must be targeted at satisfying the requirements of
relevant parties. Some of the requirements are ostensive, and some are self-evident. The quality is formed by combining the objective characteristics of entities and requirements of the subject of value. Embodying the ability of entities to satisfy the requirements of the service object; i.e., subject of value, quality is the unity of the objective characteristics of objects and the requirements of subjects. If not combined with the requirements of the service object or failed to satisfy the requirements of the subject of value, the so-called quality will make no sense. Moreover, the quality expresses the degree, difference and distinction of characteristics to satisfy requirements. The quality will be excellent if the satisfaction degree is high and the quality will be poor if the satisfaction degree is low. Therefore, the word “quality” can be defined as the degree of the inherent characteristics possessed by entities to satisfy the requirements of the relevant parties. From this understanding, “quality” is unification degree of the inner adaptability and outer adaptability of entities. It means quality is not only the pertinence degree of entities to satisfy presupposed targets or standards (i.e., inner adaptability), or only the significant degree of entities to satisfy the requirements of subjects (i.e., outer adaptability), but an organic unification of these two matters.

What Is the Quality of Higher Education?

As for the question of “what is the quality of higher education”, people can find throughout literatures that scholars basically provided understandings based on the aforementioned concept of “quality”, which emphasized on “unification of inner adaptability and outer adaptability”. The representative viewpoints include: The quality of higher education means that whether the property of higher education can satisfy the requirements of higher education subjects and the satisfaction degree. The quality of higher education refers to the sufficient degree of the students cultivated, knowledge created and service provided by higher education institutions, under established social conditions, to satisfy the requirements of the society and students’ personal development at present and in the future on the basis of following the laws of education and logics of scientific development.

“The connotation of the quality of higher education can be summarized as the degree of the efficiency, humanity and accommodation of products and services of higher education to satisfy the social and learner’s development and orderly operation of the system of higher education.”

As a complex and special system, higher education shall be in the dialectical unification of both the teaching and the learning parties. For the institution of higher learning, it mainly provides services of higher education, therefore, it shall put particular emphasis on the judgment of the quality of higher education services; for individuals of learners, their learning process is actually a process of reproduction of labor and continuous appreciation of human capitals, therefore, they shall lay emphasis on the judgment of the quality of talent cultivation. As a whole, the quality of higher education is the dialectical unification of “quality of service” and “quality of products.”

On this basis, some scholars further realized that the quality of higher education is a concept must be identified from multiple angles. The first is from the dimension of inner characteristics of knowledge. The activities of higher education are firstly a process of imparting and creating knowledge no matter from the historical development or from actual conditions. Knowledge is always the basic processing materials for the activities of higher education. Therefore, if higher education has inherent characteristics, the quality of higher education shall firstly consider the elements most familiar to the higher educators; i.e., satisfying the pursuit of the systematicness and profoundness of knowledge in activities of higher education. From the perspective of inner experts, every activity of higher education shall be carried out at a higher education stage at the end of the education following the internal attribute of knowledge; otherwise, the quality of this activity of higher education will be greatly reduced. The second is from the dimension of market choice. For identification of quality, people do not always exactly follow the single “authority” dimension of the inherent attribute, but make more perceptual judgment from their own subjective feelings. The market competitiveness of the quality of higher education can be examined by the degree of “market examination qualified rate of the terminal products of higher education”, “employment rate of graduates”, “acceptance rate of intellectual products (like publishing rate of academic writings
and achievement conversion rate)” and “ability of serving the society” as well as the sustainable competitiveness after the products of higher education entering the market. The third is from the dimension of the subjectivity growth of people. The activities of higher education are firstly activities to cultivate people. The quality of higher education is the degree to satisfy the requirements of human’s subjectivity development.

The quality of higher education in satisfying the self-harmonious development of people is hard to be identified and its manifestation is mostly shown in invisible and indirect ways. However, from the external view, the quality can be judged from satisfaction of students and their parents, happiness index of graduates after leaving the campus and harmonious degree of the society.¹¹ In these three dimensions, the knowledge dimension is an internal view of higher education oriented from knowledge, the market choice dimension is an external view of higher education oriented from the environment adaptability and the human subjectivity development dimension is from the view of higher education participants oriented from the requirements of human’s self improvement. These three dimensions are not static but in changing; they are not operated independently but disturbed with each other to reach a balanced and dynamic result.¹² On the whole, the quality of higher education is a concept which cannot be exactly defined from one single dimension, and it shall be identified as objective as possible from different dimensions. From the external view, it is a value judgment that can be accepted by the public; from the internal view, it is also a result reached by internal attributes of the higher education.¹³

**How to Evaluate the Quality of Higher Education?**

The scholars firstly noticed the “difficult measurement” of the quality of higher education. They pointed out that “the quality of education is different from the quality of products. The quality of products is firstly the qualification standard of products, and secondly the applicability of products, that is satisfaction of products to requirements of users. It is easy to make standards for the quality of products, but difficult for the quality of education, especially difficult in quantification and indexation. Particularly for the satisfaction of higher education to requirements of users, because users are different, requirements are various and the requirements have variability, the satisfaction of requirements is highly subjective, which make it difficult to make a unified quantitative standard for quality.

Therefore, it is an international problem to make standards for the quality of higher education and corresponding quality appraisal.¹⁴ Especially, when the higher education enters the center of the society, it always has numerous stakeholders. Different stakeholders have different focuses on the quality of higher education and different requirements to the quality. Thus, they form different quality appraisal standards and quality judgment results. It is quite a difficult thing to make a unified standard for the quality of higher education to make quality control and appraisal.¹⁵

Some scholars specially mentioned the issues that should be noted when measuring the quality of higher education. They pointed out that when we talk about the quality appraisal of higher education, we cannot avoid the problem that whether the quality of a talent could be measured or quantized. The largest difference between the cultivation of people and the production of things lies in that every student is unique, alive and independent and students basically cannot be “molded”, “produced in modeling”, or “produced with standards”. The quality of talents cultivated by higher education cannot be measured like physical products from multiple aspects and technology parameters. Therefore, we must be cautious of using the quantification measures when we make the quality appraisal of higher education.¹⁶ Although there is no final conclusion concerning the definition of ‘quality’ of higher education at present, one point is certain that it is hard to measure the quality in quantitative ways or in short period. It is a “soft power” and a “potential power”.¹⁷

Some scholars pointed out that when people measure the quality of higher education, they should not blindly pursue quantification, or entirely deny quantification.¹⁸ On one hand, the development of human, especially the development of nonintellectual factors like consciousness and emotions, is lack of ‘standard’ and it is hard to be exactly measured or expressed; while the mastering of some professional knowledge and application skills can be directly or indirectly measured or judged; on
the other hand, the differences among different subjects are obvious, for example, the talent cultivation of medical science and engineering technology subjects has more ‘standards’ and ‘operability’ than humanistic and social subjects, thus, there are more options can be measured or quantized when making the quality appraisal of talent cultivation.[19]

Some scholars also specially emphasized that people should highly focus on “students’ engagement into study” when measuring the quality of higher education. They pointed out that factors like material resources, financial resources, depth and breadth of courses, academic achievements of teachers and modernization and sufficiency of libraries and laboratories have great influence on the undergraduate education, but they are just replacement and input of the quality of education; actually, the most essential and important factor lies in students engagement into study! People can find from relevant researches and studies that the undergraduates, especially the freshmen, are negative, passive and absent, and what’s worse, almost 40% students are finally failed in study. Whether students can devote into study is largely depended on whether professors can devote into teaching, can touch and communicate with undergraduates, can make keen reactions to the requirements and doubts of students and can serve to the growth and development of students. The university quality appraisal must be focused on the teaching and learning of university and the ‘engagement’ of learning and the ‘satisfaction’ of teaching must be brought into the quality appraisal system.[20]

Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by Independent Innovation Foundation of Shandong University (Grant No. IFW12116), Humanities and Social Science Research Project of Ministry of Education (Grant No. 15YJA880069), and Research Project of China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Society (Grant No. 2015Y11).

Author in Brief

Liansen WANG(1972-), Ph.D., Associate Professor, Institute of Higher Education, School of Tourism, Shandong Women’s University; Research Center for Higher Education, Shandong University.

References


