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QUALITY, EXCELLENCE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

12th Maggie Woodrow Memorial Lecture

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Sjur Bergan

Introduction

It is a great honor to be invited to deliver the 12th Maggie Woodrow Memorial Lecture at the annual conference of the European Access Network. The honor is all the greater as this conference is held at Council of Europe Headquarters in Strasbourg. It was through Maggie Woodrow that the Council of Europe discovered the European Access Network, and it was through Maggie Woodrow that the EAN became an important contributor to the project on “Access to Higher Education in Europe” that the Council of Europe ran from 1992 to 1996¹. It was also through Maggie Woodrow that we found the person who ran the project with my colleague James Wimberley, who was then head of the Higher Education Division. I am very happy that this person, David Crosier, is with us today.

The Council of Europe’s Access Project, as it came to be known, resulted in a good number of publications as well as a Recommendation by the Committee of Minister to member states (Council of Europe 1998). It is, quite logically, entitled access to higher education. You could perhaps accuse us of lack of imagination but, at least in this case, not of lack of logic and coherence.

You may also say: a recommendation, and then what? Granted, a recommendation does not in itself change practice but it does build peer pressure and it does stimulate thinking. It can be a wonderful instrument in the hands of those who want to develop practice in their own country and their own institution, when they can tell their government not only that this is what other countries recommend we do but you signed up to it yourself because you adopted the recommendation. Legally, a recommendation is not binding but in practice it does carry weight – provided there are practitioners who want to use it.

The project was on access to higher education, and – logically – so is the recommendation. You can of course argue that getting into higher education is only half the story. For access to be of real value, students also need to be able to complete their higher education successfully. We were of course aware of that, and we did not see the Access Project as a stand-alone but as a specific focus on an important topic for a limited period of time, within an overall program on higher education policy that very much emphasizes completion as well as access. We even joked at the time that after the Access Project, we should launch an “Exit Project”.

When we talk about access, there is more to it than meets the ear. The recommendation defines access policy as

“A policy that aims both at the widening of participation in higher education to all sections of society, and at ensuring that this participation is effective (that is, in conditions which ensure that personal effort will lead to successful completion)” (Council of Europe 1998, para. 1.1).

¹ A brief overview and access to further resources is provided at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/CompletedActivities/Access_EN.asp#TopOfPage, accessed on April 8, 2013.

It is also worth noting that the Recommendation includes provisions on “student progress after entry” (para.5) and lifelong learning (para.6) and that it underlines that “A policy of equal opportunities is one that is designed to meet all requirements of the principle of equality, not only formal or de jure equality and the absence of discrimination, but also full and effective equality in the sense of enabling all individuals to develop and fulfill their potential” (para.1.3). Its statement to the effect that “All who are able and willing to participate successfully in higher education should have fair and equal opportunities to do so” (para.2.1) can well be seen as a precursor to some of the concerns expressed in the Council of Europe’s recent Recommendation on ensuring quality education (Council of Europe 2012).

Quality and excellence

That, of course, takes us straight to our concerns here this afternoon: quality, excellence, the social dimension and the link between them – or absence thereof. It may be wise to start by exploring the terms, and in particular to ask why the organizers of the conference might have made a distinction between quality and excellence. Are these not simply near-synonyms, and could not the social dimension be the odd term out? The impression that quality and excellence are near-synonym is strengthened by the fact that at least in some dictionaries, the terms are defined with reference to each other. Quality is a high degree of excellence and vice versa.

Quality is, of course, something we all strive for and that nobody is against. Imagine yourself answering “no” to the question: “do you think our education should be of quality?” For that matter, imagine yourself answering the question “Do you think our institution should strive for excellence?” with anything but an affirmative. The tricky question is a very different one. That question is: “What is it?” That is a question our current political debate seems happy to skip. It is, however, in trying to answer this seemingly easy but in fact quite deceitful question that we can make a link between the three terms in the title of my talk today.

Let us start, then, with quality. It is something we strive for, it is something we assure, and the assumption is that it is something we can measure. The emphasis on what could perhaps be called “measurability” reminds me of another and more colorful, if indirect, definition of quality. In his *Devil’s Dictionary* (Bierce 1883) Ambrose Bierce defines *quantity* as a “good substitute for quality, when you are hungry”. It is perhaps telling that Bierce does not offer definitions of quality or excellence. There is little reason to believe this is because his sarcasm did not extend this far. Rather, I assume the explanation is that when Ambrose Bierce wrote a century ago – he had the misfortune of riding into the Mexican revolution never to be heard from again – neither “quality” nor “excellence” was prominent terms in political discourse.

One of the most important developments in European higher education policy since 1998, the year that the Council of Europe’s Access Recommendation was adopted, and since the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recognition Convention (Council of Europe/UNESCO 1997) was adopted the year before, is the emergence of quality assurance as a key policy issue. Half a generation ago, the question was whether we needed external quality assurance or not, and the question was so hotly debated that we were unable to include explicit provisions quality assurance in the Convention. Only some five years later, the question was no longer *if* but *what* and *how*? At least to a considerable extent, that question was answered in 2005, with the adoption of the

European Standards and Guidelines (Bologna Process 2005), even if the ESG are now undergoing review.

Quality assurance is about ensuring that standards are met. This also means that quality assurance is about setting and verifying minimum standards: as long as a program or institution meets minimum standards, it will be approved. The same is true for accreditation, which can be seen as a specific type of quality assurance with direct legal consequences for a program or an institution.

In the context of quality assurance, then, “quality” is about meeting minimum standards. Of course, we do not always think of quality in those terms. I doubt that when we say we spend “quality time” with someone, we want to imply we are only doing the minimum, what the French colorfully all the *minimum de service*. Sometimes we also preface the noun quality with adjectives like “high” or “top” or even “low” – the latter especially if we refer to what others do. And it may be good to underline that the term “minimum standards” should not be taken to imply that these standards are low: as anyone who has stumbled on one can testify to, thresholds can be high.

The desire to do more than the minimum may be part of the reason why the frequent reference to “quality” is now sometimes superseded by reference to “excellence” in the political debate. Of course, nobody can be against excellence either. If we think merely “good” is not quite enough, we of course want our universities to be “excellent”. Hence we get “excellence initiatives” to make our higher education and research even better.

Or do we? A lot depends on what we mean by “our higher education and research” – and a lot depends on what we mean by “quality”, “excellence”, “better” or whatever term we choose to refer to this entity that we so often talk about as if we know what it is: good higher education. We spend a lot of time speaking about how important it is to have – or develop - education of quality or excellence but we spend very little time discussing what that actually means.

What is quality?

That is hardly specific to higher education - or to education in general. If I asked you whether you live a good life, would you answer according to the amount of money you earn – or at least the amount you can spend on luxury without going bankrupt – or according to the amount of good, unselfish deeds that you do? Do you think that the good life is that of a playboy or of a Franciscan? Granted, in English and some other languages, the answer may even depend on whether I ask about *the* good life or *a* good life, but not all languages make that particular distinction and not all languages have definite or indefinite articles.

On this one, I am in the camp of the Franciscans. I am also in the Franciscan camp when you translate the question about the good life to the quality of education. Quality is too often used uncritically, as if it were a “one size fits all” concept, defined and understood once and for all, without reference to purpose or societal development. Yet that is of course not true, any more than the concept of an educated person is unaffected by time and place. A good thousand years ago my home region had “law-speakers”, *lögsögumaður*, that is people – well, *men*, given the

time and age – that had memorized all the laws of that society and could recite the appropriate part of the law to settle disputes at the *þing*, which combined elements of both parliament and court. This was before the age of EU Directives, so the legal corpus was less extensive than it is today. What most of the “law-speakers”, at least in the earliest periods, could not do was write those texts down. They were highly educated – but illiterate.

Nobody saw any contradiction in the sophisticated, highly educated illiterate in the Nordic countries ten or eleven centuries ago, just as few people today think a highly educated person necessarily has a good knowledge of Latin and classical Greek, possibly with Sanskrit added for good measure. In Western Europe and North America one century ago, that particular proposition would have been looked at with incredulity. On the other hand, can you be well educated today without an ability to use information technology and at least one or two foreign languages? I leave that as a rhetorical question, even if I am afraid that when it comes to knowledge of foreign languages – or at least of more than one foreign language for those whose native language is not English – it may not be. And I do know people who consider themselves highly educated even if they are functionally monolingual and computer illiterate.

Today, quality in higher education is often confounded with quality in research, and in natural sciences and medicine at that. This is perhaps one of the curses of rankings – or maybe the rankings came precisely because we were not so careful about specifying what we meant by quality, as long as it was somehow measurable. As we know only too well, rankings mainly say something about an institution’s research performance, even if each ranking seems to have its own criteria. That may be valuable information if an institution’s research performance is what you want to know about. However, it says little about the quality of an institution as such: about its research in other disciplines, about its teaching and learning environment at first, second and third degree level, about what it does to promote lifelong learning, about how well it works with its local and regional community.

That the quality of teaching might be important for the quality of an institution is perhaps not so difficult to argue. The difficulty lies rather in measuring the quality of teaching, so we leave it at research, where at least we have citation indexes and reputation. Since natural sciences and related disciplines like medicine have a different and perhaps more internationalized publications pattern than humanities, social sciences or theology, we even leave it at natural sciences. Rankings somehow take the easy way out by giving importance to what is easily measurable rather than by measuring what is important. But what do efforts to promote lifelong learning and work with the local and regional community say about the quality of an institution? That, of course, depends on our understanding of quality – and that again depends on what we think education should achieve.

If we look at public debate today, we could be led to believe that education has one purpose and one purpose only: to prepare for employment. Preparing learners for the labor market *is* important, make no mistake about it. It *is* important, even if preparation for employment is not really what university rankings measure. Some research in natural science is clearly important for developing our economy, at least in the medium to long term, but some is not and employability is, to my knowledge, not a criterion in the rankings.

So my point is *not* that employability – the current term – is not an important objective for higher education. It clearly is. My point is rather that employability is not the *only* objective. This

should be equally clear, but if it is, current public debate makes great efforts to avoid stating the obvious.

What then, are the other objectives of education? The Council of Europe has defined a total of four:

- Preparation of the labor market
- Preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies
- Personal development
- The development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base (Bergan 2005, Council of Europe 2007).

These objectives are complementary; they are not mutually exclusive. Many of the competences you need for employment will also help you be an active citizen and contribute to your personal development. We could certainly discuss whether these four objectives are the right ones or whether more should be added. What I hope we would not discuss is whether higher education has a range of purposes.

If we want to know whether a higher education institution is good or even excellent, we would therefore need to assess it according to these purposes. We would also need to assess the institution in relation to what are often described as the three main functions – as opposed to objectives – of higher education: research, teaching and learning, and community service.

Combining the four purposes and three functions will be an ambitious agenda for any institution. It is so ambitious that many will not be succeed in doing so – and many will not try. That is an entirely legitimate choice, as long as it is a choice arising from institutional policy and not an academic variety of the statement that “Ours is a non-profit organization. That is not the way it was planned but that it the way it turned out”.

We need institutions with strong research programs and we need institutions with excellent teaching and learning environments as well as those engaging with their local communities. Some institutions may aim at – and even succeed in - playing important roles in all areas while others may give a priority to one or two. If an institution chooses to focus on teaching programs for first and second cycle degrees, possibly in a limited range of academic areas, and mainly aim at attracting students from a given region as well as to contribute to the civic and economic life of that region, this is an entirely legitimate choice. Measured against the objectives it sets for itself, such an institution can be of either high or low quality. Measured against the standards associated with world class research universities, it can of course never succeed.

Institutions should therefore be encouraged to express their mission and goals and then be measured against those. Public authorities and other funders may of course have views on how many institutions of a specific profile they are willing to fund and they may have views on whether the goals formulated by an institution are about right. The goals may be too modest, or they may be too ambitious. Public authorities may tell an institution that if you choose to pursue that specific institutional profile, it will not be with public funding and they may decide that even if the goals and institutional profile are fine, measured against those goals, the institution does not perform well enough to be considered a part of the national education system and therefore cannot deliver recognized qualifications. 8 or 10 years ago, the Albanian Ministry developed a

master plan for higher education that concentrated research funding to relatively few disciplines – those that were considered to be of particular importance to the economic development of the country or for Albanian history, language and culture – and to very few institutions. One might well discuss the particular choices made in that plan but it was a good and, in my view, courageous example of the exercise of public authority at system level and the considerations that led to the plan are easy to understand, even if other choices would also have been legitimate.

The education system

When we refer to public authorities, we no longer talk about individual institutions. We talk about education systems. However, we rarely think about education systems when we discuss quality. Sometimes we explicitly do, however, when we make sweeping and not always justified statements about the quality of education in country A. Such broad assumptions may also be an underlying cause when credentials evaluators hesitate to recognize qualifications from all or most institutions in country B.

In both cases, we treat – albeit implicitly - the quality of an education system as an extension of the quality of its institutions. That is a doubtful proposition because it lends no specific function to the education system – or perhaps we should say it ascribes the education system no “added value”, to stay within the received sociolect. It is a particularly doubtful proposition if we recognize that an education system includes institutions with very different missions and objectives and therefore different measures of quality.

Discussing the characteristics and added value of an education system is outside the scope of my address here today but one aspect of it is at the heart of the relationship between quality and social inclusion. While I do not think a higher education institution is better the more applicants it turns down, it is clearly conceivable that a good higher education institution is unable to accept all the qualified applicants vying for a place. The same, incidentally, may happen to a less good institution, and it may apply to all study programs or only to some. Within the same institution, there may be more applicants than places for an economics program of only average reputation, whereas at the same time there may not be enough applicants to fill a well reputed program in medieval history. In this case, of course, one would suspect applicants have been following the public policy debate and taken its point about employability to heart – possibly unimaginatively so.

Here we touch on one very important “added value” of the education system: restricting access may be an option for individual institutions. It should not be for education systems. I cannot conceive of a good education system that would not offer adequate opportunities for all its students. A system that leaves able and motivated learners by the wayside would, in my eyes, be neither excellent nor of adequate quality. In the case of an education system, social inclusion is, in my view, part and parcel of the definition of quality.

The recently adopted Council of Europe Recommendation on ensuring quality education stipulates that “quality education gives access to learning to all pupils and students, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, adapted to their needs as appropriate”. The proposition that social inclusion is a key feature of quality education systems is, incidentally,

also taken up by the OECD, whose approach to education is often different from that of the Council of Europe. The OECD recently stated that “[S]uccessful education systems are able to guarantee that all students succeed at high levels” (OECD 2013).

Providing opportunities for all is not simply a question of having enough places of study, even if that can be challenging enough. That would cater to those who are already well qualified and the importance and challenge of that should not be underestimated. It is, however, the easy part.

Quality, excellence and social inclusion

Even in an age of mass education, there is a certain reproductive or multiplying quality to education: those who already have will get more but the have-nots will not automatically become have’s simply by increasing numbers. Motivation cannot be measured in places of study, even if a lack of places of study can kill motivation.

Another feature of the education system is that it is a coherent whole and that the basis for success in its later stages is laid at an early stage. If students are to succeed in higher education, they also need to succeed in primary and secondary education. If students are to be motivated for higher education, they need to be motivated at an early age. Late conversions to the value of education should of course not be excluded and everything should be done to help delayed vocations but in general terms, the earlier a student is motivated to learn, the greater his or her chances of doing so successfully throughout life.

If one of the characteristics of a high quality education system is that it allows all learners to develop their talents to the full, it must also help learners develop their aspirations. In particular, it must do so for primary and secondary school students, as well as those in kindergarten, who come from backgrounds in which education is not valued and perhaps even derided. If their parents and friends see school as a waste of time and maybe even good grades as sign of lacking solidarity, how can children develop the motivation to access and then succeed in secondary and higher education if the education system does not help them? The basis for successful access policies and measures in higher education is, at least in most cases, laid in kindergarten and in primary school. Schools must convince children that they *can* learn and that learning is worthwhile – because learning opens doors later in life and because learning is exciting in its own right.

An excellent education system ties its two ends together. It takes children in pre-school and primary school and turns them into motivated learners who not only can but want to pursue their interests and talents in higher education.

I said I would choose the Franciscans over the playboys, so let us put it this way:

- Where there is disinterest, quality education creates interest.
- Where there is resistance, quality education motivates and demonstrates opportunities.
- Where there are learning difficulties, quality education offers support.

- Where students tell themselves that studying is too challenging, quality education shows them that they can and should rise to the challenge.
- Where there is pressure toward uniformity of thought and of mission, quality education recognizes and demonstrates the value of diversity.
- Where there are structural and financial obstacles and restraints, quality education removes them – but it understands that removing obstacles can only work if students are motivated to jump at the opportunities offered to them.
- Where there is ignorance, quality education brings knowledge, understanding and the ability to do as well as humane and democratic attitudes.

Conclusion

The question, then, is not how quality, excellence, and the social dimension could possibly fit together but how they could possibly be kept apart. Education must help us develop the kind of economy we need but even more, it must help us develop the kind of society we want.

Whether excellent or “simply” of sufficient quality, education must enable us all to be citizens and respond to the challenge thrown down by John Ralston Saul, who said:

...I find our education is increasingly one aimed at training loyal employees, even though the state and the corporations are increasingly disloyal. What we should be doing is quite different. It turns on our ability to rethink our education and our public expectations so that we create a non-employee, non-loyal space for citizenship. After all, a citizen is by definition loyal to the state because it belongs to her or him. That is what frees the citizen to be boisterous, outspoken, cantankerous and, all in all, by corporatist standards, disloyal. This is the key to the success of our democracy. (Saul 2009: 318)

This, I believe, is in line with the convictions of the European Access Network as it is with those of the Council of Europe. Reminding ourselves of this and working to make this kind of education come true is, I believe, a highly appropriate way of honoring Maggie Woodrow.

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