Quality's Qualities

(in academic contexts)

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December 2008

(formulations revised December 2025)

DRAFT VERSION

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Introduction and Argument

Much has been written about 'quality' in higher education over the last decades, and not a few authors have despaired at trying to define what this is. One difficulty is semantic: the core meaning of the noun as "an essential feature by which a thing may be identified" – as in 'her ethereal quality' – has been largely supplanted by having it refer to "a position in a scale of ranks," one often denoting superiority or excellence – as in 'this is quality merchandise.' The noun, in other words, is now used the way the adjective has been used since the early 18th century. To ask what quality is (meaning the noun), results in a near-tautological answer: it means "being of high quality" (which is the adjectival usage).

Another difficult results from an association which became more common in the 1980s. Here the term is associated with quality control and quality assurance. Quality control, originally, meant to ensure the adequacy of manufactured products. Quality assurance meant the systematic monitoring of various project aspects ensure specified standards were adhered to. This is not only a different usage than the one noted above, but also carries echoes of industrial(ized) processes very unlike those found in academe.

Among academics, many have been content to repeat the suggestion that there were "five discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality" – as exceptional, as fitness for purpose, as perfection, as value for money, and as transformation (Harvey, 2004, citing Harvey and Green, 1993). This is inadequate because it leaves much unclear. If interrelated, how does 'quality as transformation' relate to 'quality as exceptional'? Or 'value for money' to 'fitness for purpose'' It is also hard to know how to apply. Let's say, facetiously, that if quality is perfection, and we all agree Harvard is a high quality institution, does that make Harvard perfect? Or if quality is 'value for money,' can we, or do we know how to, assess that value?

More crucially or complexly, to claim these ways are interrelated doesn't cleanly separate the different levels at which these meanings of quality might apply. Fitness for purpose sounds like agenda-setting or policy implementation, a programmatic meaning that operates in a rather different context than seeing quality as transformational, and that is in turn not the same as reaching a judgment that an article or book is exceptional. It also completely omits a meaning of quality which is crucial to the academic enterprise. Quality's qualities, in short, deserve more scrutiny.

Nevertheless, Harvey's is a good effort, and I suggest that in the context of academe, it makes sense to focus on three of these aspects: quality as exceptional, as fitness for purpose, and as a 'perceived attribute.' These correspond, in part, to different levels and types of

assessments in systems of higher education. The inadequacy of other suggestions, at least for academe contexts, including taking quality to mean perfection (or consistency), value for money, and transformation, or trying to redefine it in normative terms or in terms of value (as Kemenade, Pupius and Hardjono (2008) try to), call for a longer treatment – but not here.

It is worth reiterating, though, because this usage has become so pervasive, that to think of quality as quality control or quality assurance adopts in appropriate usages associated with industrial(ized) manufacturing. Quality in this context means making products in conformity to prior specifications. To put this definitionally, conformity to a standard is often a required characteristic of a finished product in manufacturing, with quality control afterwards a test to see if the product resulting from that manufacturing process meets the pre-established standard (Green, 1994, p. 13).

For all the spin-offs and commercial applications and patents which grow out of research at academic or research institutions, this manufacturing context is simply alien to much of what drives intellectual endeavor, namely intrinsic interest. Intellectual work, research and genuinely free investigation, in many fields, is deliberately intended to explore, not conform, and to establish specifications rather than follow pre-determined ones. To speak of quality control fundamentally misunderstands how academics think of quality, because it emphasizes neither the noun or adjectival meanings noted above, instead substituting for them process and output meanings. Of course: academic careers are built on output, but it is the judgment of output which matters, not the nuts and bolts of production processes. One might even regret this a little, since there are fields in which knowing something about how the product was created can be a genuine help in understanding it better – whether this is in chemistry or in literature studies – but such processes in themselves are neutral, steps along the way rarely subjected to an assessment of what their 'quality' might have been.

Aspects of Quality

I. Quality as exceptional

Quality in academe has meant special, distinctive, or exceptional. While often applied in the past to individuals, it has become increasingly associated with higher education institutions as a whole. The 2005 Excellence Initiative launched "to promote top-level research and improve the overall quality of universities and science" (German Science Council, 2005) in Germany is an example. Opinions differ as to what makes an institution

distinctive, special, 'excellent,' or exceptional, so to simplify matters, I first look at this question from the point of view of U.S. students faced with the choice of where to pursue their studies. That implicitly treats future students as consumers in a marketplace filled with institutions, at least some of which will praise their own distinctiveness or excellence as a selling point. Then I turn to the producers, namely the institutions and what they have to say.

Consumer (student) choice

According to the 2006 CRIP survey of freshmen conducted by UCLA'S Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), which included more than 271,000 students at 393 colleges and universities and was statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of 1.3 million first-time, full-time students, the two most important reasons for a student to attend their preferred (first-choice) institution was its academic reputation (62%) and that graduates got good jobs (53%). Around one-third cited an institution's reputation for social activities (36%), financial assistance offers (33%), track record of its graduates gaining admission to top graduate or professional schools (31%), or cost (29%). Respondents also cited proximity to home (20%), website information (18%), or rankings in national magazines (18%), though these were comparative unimportant (Hurtado and Pryor, 2007, pp. 29-30; Morse, 2008; Hoover, 2008). Yet while 'academic reputation' is the key for two-thirds of these beginning students, it is not clear how students learn about that reputation, nor even how one should define it. Many factors can, or might, contribute, and the vagueness of the term has been criticized when 'reputation' forms a part of efforts to rank universities (Dill and Soo, 2005).

But it might be some combination of input, process, and output factors specific to an institution, as Dill (1995) suggested, and argued input is the most significant. Evidence from small surveys (Conard and Conard, 2000) finds that to prospective students, academic reputation is linked to a cluster of elements that include career preparation (the second factor in the HERI survey), curriculum and selectivity. One study (Astin, 1985) claims that reputational measures, implying a degree of ranking, "can be quite well predicted by three objective and readily available indicators: undergraduate selectivity, per student expenditure, and number of doctorate-granting departments" (summarized in Dill and Soo, 2005, p. 506).

Selectivity is often mentioned, or to put it more sharply, exclusivity. A reputation for being exceptional, distinctive, special, may not be the same as an institution also providing a quality education, but selectivity does point to one – humorous – part of being exceptional: just how exceptionally difficult it is to be accepted and get access to that institution.

This matter of exceptionality and selectivity deserves at least a little elaboration. In the fall of 2007, Amherst College, a private institution with 1,686 students and a student/faculty ratio of 8:1, admitted 18% of those who applied. A mile down the road, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass), a public institution with 25,873 students and a student/ faculty of 17:1, admitted 66% of those who applied (Oram, 2009, pp. 53, 73-74). According to the 2008 US News and World Report (USNWR) rankings, Amherst College is the best liberal arts college in the U.S., and UMass the fiftieth best public university (USNWR, 2009). Taking quality to mean 'exceptional,' and defining that in turn only in terms of exclusiveness of access, Amherst College is thus a "quality institution" (Number 1!) relative to UMass (only Number 50…). Exclusivity is even present when controlling for size: Amherst College has 1/15th the number of students of UMass, yet admits only one-sixth of its applicants compared to the four-sixths admitted to UMass. With 8 versus 17 students per faculty, there are clearly many more chances for Amherst College students to have more personalized interactions with their professors than can UMass students down the road.

By the same token, this is a wholly unfair comparison: a large public university is simply quite different than a small private college. If one defines quality as 'exceptional,' then an appropriate *relative frame of reference* is needed to draw more sensible comparisons. The top-ranked liberal arts college ought instead to be compared with the fiftieth-ranked college like it, and the fiftieth ranked public university with the top-ranked.

That is a little tricky in the first case, since three liberal arts colleges (Gettysburg, Pitzer, and Rhodes) tied for 49th place in the USNWR rankings, and each differ by selectivity, but averaging the three gives an acceptance rate of 38%. So only based on the percent of applicants admitted, the 'Number 1' ('exceptional' and 'quality') private liberal arts college is twice as exclusive as the fiftieth such college (18% vs. 38%). Indeed, top ranking and exclusivity seem to go hand-in-hand: 7 of the top 10 private liberal arts colleges in the USNWR ranking admit less than 20% of those who apply.

Though the figures differ for public universities, the conclusions are similar. The University of California at Berkeley was the top-ranked public university in the U.S. at the time, and of those who applied in 2007, 23% were admitted Compared to UMass, the fiftieth ranked public university, Berkeley was thus three times as exclusive. Indeed, 5 of the top 10 public universities in the USNWR ranking admitted 35% or less of those who applied. Top ranking and exclusivity are not confined to private higher education institutions.

Deans of admissions at highly-ranked institutions in the U.S. will quickly modify this by pointing out that self-selection bias is at work. Prospective students who think they have

no chance of being admitted to a 'selective' institution will not even apply. The converse is also true: those who have previously received indications of their 'exceptional' talent may well be drawn to apply only to the most 'exclusive' colleges and universities.

There is some basis for this assertion if one looks at SAT scores. At Amherst College, over 90% of the student body achieves 600+ points, so that becomes the functional minimum a prospective student needs to reach. Only about 40% of the UMass freshmen are at this higher range, one of many factors encouraging those who do less well on this test to set their sights lower (but see below). The far broader base from which public universities draw their students, and the much larger student body, means the bar is lower. Even UC Berkeley only achieves the SAT profile of the 49th ranked liberal arts college (Gettysburg) – though it does attract many 'exceptionally' qualified students (scoring over 700 points on the SAT).

Table 1

SAT Scores of Entering Freshmen, by percent (2006)

	Verbal > 500	Math > 500	Verbal > 600	Math > 600	Verbal > 700	Math > 700	
Liberal Arts Colleges							
Rank 1	100	100	93	92	61	63	Amherst
Rank 49	100	100	78	81	15	11	Gettysburg
Public Universities							
Rank 1	91	95	72	81	31	46	UC Berkeley
Rank 50	81	86	35	42	7	7	UMass

Source: information for each institution available at education.yahoo.com/college/facts (Source: Peterson's); rankings are from USNWR (2008).

Behind this lies an implicit, sometimes explicit, notion that exclusivity is strongly connected with *desirability*. Many prospective students wish to study at smaller colleges in the U.S. – the average size of the top 50 liberal arts colleges in the USNWR rankings is only 2,000 students – and 'wanting to attend an institution of a particular size' is a factor of moderate importance (43%) in the HERI survey of student choice. Even those who do not ace the SAT test can still attend a smaller college: eight of the top 50 liberal arts colleges in the U.S. accept more than 50 percent of those who apply. These will provide a fine education – just not one from an 'exceptional' college.

Students are sensible. When they say 'academic reputation,' they tend to mean the 'quality' of an institution in broad terms, not necessarily the ones discussed here. One can best illustrate this by the many guidebooks issued to help prospective students choose where to study. Some address financial concerns (*America's Best Value Colleges*, *Best Buys in College Education*), others try to finesse the question of quality by using similarly hard-to-define terms (*The Best 366 Colleges*). One should understand this last title as part of an attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff: the United States has thousands of higher education institutions to choose from, so to have a guide to 366 may highlight only 10% or less of them. There are even guides for those who lack the high grades and high SAT scores, such as *America's Best Colleges for B Students: A College Guide for Students without Straight A's* as well as the inspired *Harvard Schmarvard: Getting Beyond the Ivy League to the College That is Best for You*. One can put it another way: when it comes to quality, students are realists who will select the solid noun over the speculative adjective.

Producer (institution/program) choice

Student choice is a consumer-based perspective, but in recent decades an emphasis has been placed on the supplier perspective, particularly by government-supported funding agencies that wish for a means to evaluate the excellence, if not also the ranking, of particular disciplines at particular institutions. Behind this, again, lies a notion of quality that is defined as the pursuit of the exceptional (or the exclusive).

For those judged favourably, this is about bragging rights, the very human desire to be able to say "our institution (or program) is the best." It's a marketing argument as well. The means, or rather the methodology, by which such judgment is arrived at, as well as the appropriateness of the comparative framework used, does not bear much scrutiny. Put more pointedly, those who come out well are moderately reluctant to see the basis for the judgment of their rank be questioned or examined.

For those who rank further down, which means the vast majority of institutions or programs, there is an impulse to say: "why not try to be <u>like</u> the best?" That mentality, in turn, rests on a notion there is some process that *can be emulated* to reach the top. Known as 'benchmarking' in industry, it assumes the more successful competitor is doing something that gives an advantage, and that if the less successful competitor can only figure out what it is, and do that, then they too will be successful.

One noteworthy, market-based, example of this was provided by the University of Texas in the early 1980s. After a university committee concluded in 1975 that the institution

was "not yet a university of the first class," and using the windfall provided by oil money, it lured top physicists (Stephen Weinberg, a Nobel Prize winner, at Harvard from 1973-82; John Wheeler, at Princeton from 1938-76, and Marshall Rosenbluth, at Princeton from 1967-80) to move to its Austin campus (Time, 1982). But a ranking of the 'best physics doctoral programs' in the U.S. done 15 years later (National Research Center, 1995) did not list the University of Texas among the top ten programs, and in Times Higher Education surveys another 10 years on (2004-2007), and of the top universities for sciences worldwide, Texas consistently ranked around 25. It is tempting to see this as proof for the proposition that *you can't buy* excellence. Emulation, even when it is successful, may also prove exceedingly short-lived. To take an automotive example, at one point the 'hot' manufacturing model to emulate was not Ford's assembly line, where one worker repeatedly did the same thing, but Volvo's 'Uddevalla' system, where 20-person work teams put together entire units such as engines or electrical systems (Lohr, 1987). One of its benefits was that it seemed to reduce worker alienation from the means of production. But it was soon replaced by Japanese 'lean' production systems that emphasized cost-efficiency (Rehder, 1992).

Emulation is sensitive to the context in which the (supposedly better, or newer, or more appropriate) model is to be applied (Jacoby, 2000). Amherst College, or the London School of Economics, have the reputation for quality that they do as a direct result of the particular paths they have followed. What makes Oxford University what it is today cannot simply be copied, and even the founding of "the other place," Cambridge University, as a result of scholars fleeing Oxford in the 13th century, is not a story of direct, conscious emulation in pursuit of some elusive 'quality.' Indeed, "even if it were possible to make every institution like Oxford or Cambridge, would it be desirable?" (Green, 1994, p. 13). There is a family resemblance, one that arose because they were founded in the same era, in a pattern repeated in the 19th century among the 'red brick,' and in the 20th century, among the 'plate glass' universities in England. Emulation suggests trying to copy what are exceptions, and in the modern era, academic nstitutions profit from being different, students want a university education that suits, and is suited to, them personally, and not everyone wants the same thing out of their university experience.

A more significant problem lies in thinking that all higher education is *supposed* to converge towards the 'excellence' embodied by the best institutions. If quality means exceptional, then by definition, all universities that are not Harvard, Oxford, or similar in rank, by definition are of <u>inferior quality</u>. In a world of "the best – and the rest," nearly all institutions can only try to reduce the gap somewhat, not eliminate the difference. The

University of Texas example is a chastening one: excellence will not come about by trying to buy one's way to the top.

The trend in higher education has in any case been towards greater institutional *divergence*. Mass education means founding more and more universities, increasing the diversity of institutions as a whole. The objectives pursued, when one surveys higher education, become broader, and that means increasing divergence from objectives pursued by exclusive liberal arts colleges or exclusive public universities. "Each institution serves distinctive and different stakeholders" (Fife and Janosik, 1999), suggesting a far more modest approach, or trying to achieve quality in a manner that does not define it as being exceptional.

II. Quality as fitness for purpose

Fife and Janosik (1999) appropriately note that quality "is better understood not as a noun (a static condition) but as a verb – an active process with ever-changing outcomes." Using the abstract language in which this is often couched, they argue for a vision of quality which relates mission to "resource inputs, systems and processes, outcomes, and the need for continuous assessment and improvement." It is a model sometimes characterized as input and output, with throughputs, and involving process monitoring and feedback. Input and output is a process, and the 'fitness for purpose' sense of 'quality' can be restated to say it involves finding suitable or acceptable means to reach stated ends.

This is again a usage drawn from the business world. The focus is not a particular level of excellence here but instead rather – as the ISO8402 standard puts it – "the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs." Fitness, though, defines quality to mean the *degree or ability* to fulfil, leaving open whether what is to be fulfilled is a stated mission or the needs and desires of a customer. In that sense it is a *performance standard,* one often geared to how effectively a given system or process (the means) achieves a stated goal (the end). The standard of *effectiveness* (actual production of an effect) ought not be confused with a standard of *efficiency* (acting in such a way as to avoid loss or waste in achieving the stated goal), though they are often conflated. As this is all rather abstract, here is an effort to illustrate what this means with specific examples.

In the last decades, considerable emphasis has been placed on gender issues in universities. Mission statements have been crafted which give an idea of how quality as

"fitness for purpose" can be applied. The Gender Research Centre (GRC) of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, for example, states that its mission is "to promote knowledge in gender research and women's studies" and "support action on enhancing gender equality and women's status" (GRC, 2008).

While ends are stated (promoting knowledge, enhancing gender equality and women's status), it remains vague what 'promoting' or 'enhancing' might mean in practice, as do the goals of 'gender equality' and 'status.' No performance standard is identified, nor is it clear what ability the GRC or this university has to fulfil these stated goals.

By contrast, the mission of Wellesley College, an institution devoted since 1875 to the education of women, "is to provide an excellent liberal arts education for women who will make a difference in the world". That its graduates include Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright is certainly an argument for the institution having successfully fulfilled its declared mission: these two graduates have "made a difference in the world."

The comparison of these simple mission statements can lead to an unfounded and unfair conclusion that, if quality is taken to mean 'fitness for purpose' with respect to gender mission, the GRC Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong is of low quality and Wellesley College is of high quality. It is no less unfair to use Wellesley College as an example – its very *raison d'être* is its gender mission – than it was to use Amherst College above, though. Far better to compare institutions historically dominated by men that have now become more sensitive to gender issues. For example, the ninth point of the mission statement at Humboldt University in Berlin, states it wishes "equal opportunity for all," and describes this as follows:

> Providing equal opportunities for both women and men at the university as well as in society is an important goal of Humboldt-Universität. Accordingly, it does its best to ensure that opportunities are distributed fairly, and to utilize and promote women's abilities in teaching, research and administration. It employs all available means for achieving equal opportunity at all levels and promises to strengthen its gender studies efforts (HU Berlin, 2008).

Still, it's difficult to know what a "fair distribution of opportunities" or "strengthening its gender studies efforts" means, if they are to be understood as goals.

Faced with such vagueness, not uncommon to mission statements about gender, other institutions have chosen to require all their departments to include courses on gender or integrate gender aspects into existing courses as a means towards reaching goals such as "strengthening gender studies efforts."

The performance measures embodied in questions such as: "What has the physics department done in curricular terms towards achieving this goal during the last 3 years? The

sociology department?" makes it easy to establish the degree (effectiveness) to which the goal has been attained. It's a straightforward way to establish 'fitness for purpose.' A somewhat more problematic solution is to create (but then not infrequently marginalize both in programmatic and financial terms) specific gender studies programs or centers. The more explicit a university makes its gender mission and how it is to be achieved, the easier it is to find 'fitness of purpose' measures, hence establish 'quality' in this particular sense.

A good example is the Gender Policy Code of Conduct adopted by the Universität Zürich (2008) in March of 2006:

Basic Principle:

Members of the University of Zurich must work in a decisive and creative way to guarantee that women and men have the same rights and the same opportunities to develop. The following code of conduct applies to everyone who works or studies at the University of Zurich. The administrative committees of the University of Zurich support members of the University of Zurich in advancing and practicing actual equality between women and men.

1. The interests of both genders must be optimally served at all levels and in all functions. This includes equal representation in personnel as well as other ways of including the specific concerns of each gender.
2. The University of Zurich strives for a balanced representation of both genders in all functions and committees at the university. If one gender is clearly underrepresented, a candidate of the underrepresented gender will be given preference on principle as long as the qualifications are equivalent. The advancement of female academics receives particular attention.
3. Gender must not have disadvantageous consequences for any person, male or female.
4. The University of Zurich advances forms of employment that help members combine career, studies and a family. The university has day care facilities for its members' children.
5. The dignity and integrity of every human being must be respected. Sexual harassment and sexist behaviour violate the dignity of a human being.
6. Use of language at the University of Zurich aims at reflecting the greatest possible amount of gender equality.
7. Data relevant to the issue of equal opportunities are collected regularly and linked with the university's management tools. They are then analysed with regard to achievements and future goals. The Gender Equality Committee and the UniFrauenstelle – Office for Gender Equality advise members of the university in questions concerning gender policy.

The approach to quality as fitness for purpose, in other words, is what is also used in program evaluation. It simply asks: does a particular program in fact do what it claims to be able to do? Who makes claims is relevant, so many program evaluation systems start with self-evaluation or self-assessment, then augmented by outside review involving other faculty and academic peers, academic deans, or outside evaluators.

The underlying question is always: Is the program fitting its stated purpose? But this is not 'quality' in the sense most people understand it. This is quality in its sense as quality control or quality assurance, the question, one might say, of whether the machine is producing in the manner that it is supposed to (e.g., is the product or outcome of the process in conformity with prior specifications?). If the goal is conformity with a mission statement, this

might be appropriate, at least at some levels, it is quite inadequate for other levels. As Diana Green pointed out, if having 'purpose' is to declare or define an end to be attained, it is anything but clear what the purpose of higher education might be (Green, 1994, p. 15). Nor is it clear who defines it – the government? students? future employers? Efforts to do so can result in vague generalities, such as promoting the general powers of the mind or transmitting a common culture to the next generation or meeting the needs of the economy. Fitness for purpose, in other words, begs the larger question of what purpose is being served.

The higher the unit, the worse this issue becomes. Adding a 'gender component' to a physics class is one thing, but even ensuring balanced representation on a committee can start to be a problem if, say, only 10 or 20 percent of a faculty is female. 'Enhancing gender equality' as at Hong Kong can, for example, run female faculty ragged if it means they are expected to sit on twice or three times the number of committees their male peers do. At the level of the institution itself, 'fitness for purpose' can become so vast that it is no longer sensible as a way to define quality. Take the mission statement of the University of California at Berkeley. It includes 1. transmitting knowledge and skills to students, 2. creating an educated workforce, 3. expanding fundamental knowledge of human nature, society, and the natural world, 4. yielding benefits for California, 5.providing public service programs and industry partnerships, 6. disseminating research results, and 6. being open to all Californians. It is admirable, but of such breath-taking scope (and so open to interpretation) that it is hard to identify, much less assess, what 'success' at reaching even a few of the ends it pursues might mean – or how to measure it.

It may be best at this point to go back to the prospective student looking for place to study. In the process, given they have their occupational future in their sights (53% want to go to a place whose graduates get good jobs), and two-thirds want to go to a place with a good academic reputation, may wonder whether the effort is worthwhile. In answer, a classy one, they might do well to ponder what the former President of Bryn Mawr College, Mary Patterson, once gave as an answer: "The purpose of higher education," she said, "is to make your mind a more interesting place to inhabit for the rest of your life**."**

III. Quality as <u>perceived attribute</u>

The most difficult and yet crucial meaning in the academic context connects quality to what one could call "the judgment of worth." Quality in this sense is not noun, adjective or

verb but a *perceptual judgment*, whether of a part or of the whole, *of the attributes* of what is being examined. Making this judgment, or perceiving quality in these terms, is rooted in experience – both with the class of things being examined and with the making of judgments about them. The terminology is immediately problematic, of course, because it is already a step beyond this to assert that such perception is of the "inherent characteristic" or the "essential character" or the "property" (for philosophical usages, see Properties, 2000) of what we are examining.

The problem is that "as soon as you try to define it [e.g., this 'quality as perceived'], something goes haywire" (Pirsig, 2006, p. 260). The most straightforward illustration comes from a particular university classroom setting: Pirsig, as teacher, describes what he did (and does so in the third person):

> A few days later he [e.g., the author, Persig] worked up a definition of his own and put it on the blackboard… 'Quality is a characteristic of thought and statement that is recognized by a non-thinking process. Because definitions are a product of rigid, formal thinking, quality cannot be defined…But even though Quality cannot be defined, *you know what Quality is*! [emphasis added]

Pandemonium ensued, with students protesting they didn't know what it was, while the teacher asserted that they, in fact, did.

> He had selected two examples of student composition. The first was a rambling, disconnected thing with interesting ideas that never built into anything. The second was a magnificent piece by a student who was mystified himself about why it had come out so well. He read both, then asked for a show of hands on who thought the first was best. Two hands went up. He asked how many liked the second better. Twenty-eight hands went up.
>
> "Whatever it is," he said, "that caused the overwhelming majority to raise their hands for the second one is what I meant by Quality. So *you* know what it is."
>
> There was a long reflective silence after this (Pirsig, 2006, p. 260).

This was a class about rhetoric and English composition. Pirsig then delineates that is quite possible to specify certain aspects of quality relevant to the rhetoric used in writing, including "unity, vividness, authority, economy, sensitivity, clarity, emphasis, flow, suspense, brilliance, precision, proportion, depth, and so on," and that to achieve greater unity, for example, it helps to craft an outline first, or that the use of footnotes can help the authority of an argument (Pirsig, 2006, pp. 262-63). Yet Pirsig himself soon became dissatisfied, since 'quality' assessed this way seemed highly subjective or no more than a popularity contest, the immediate appeal a composition had when read out to a class. Quality might be something you "just see" or it could be more subtle, only recognizable over a longer time period. That in turn could mean that "people disagreed about quality because some just used their immediate

emotions whereas others applied their overall knowledge:" it led to a split between a 'romantic,' "just seeing" version of quality (exemplified by the students) and a 'classic' "overall understanding" version (exemplified by teachers or professors) (Pirsig, 2006, p. 300). The resolution to this dilemma was that "people differ about quality not because quality is different, but because people are different in terms of experience" (Pirsig, 2006, p. 319). [emphasis added]

Pirsig wrote in the 1970s. It is some measure of his perspicacity to read, in the conclusion of an analysis undertaken a generation later, that the considerable effort to formalize judgments in the 2008 United Kingdom Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) as to the originality, significance and rigor of academic research in a wide variety of fields has "to a large extent…failed" (Johnston, 2008, p. 138):

> Academics operate within paradigms, communities of scholars with shared understandings of knowledge, approaches and methods from which spring appreciations of the relative quality (originality, rigour and significance) of work in their (sub-) fields…[Their task in the RAE] was to make those understandings and appreciations specific so that their procedures for classification of the submitted outputs would be generally accepted….The result should be a series of clear, discipline-specific, statements of what comprises academic work of different quality (Johnston, 2008, pp. 130-31).

An effort was made to define 'quality levels' on a star-rated system. Members of panels in this exercise were to reach "a collective view on the quality profile of research described in each submission" in terms of originality, significance and rigor such that four-star research was "quality that is world-leading," three-star was "internationally excellent… but falls short of the highest standards of excellence," two-star was "recognized internationally" and one-star was "recognized nationally." Panel members were to "exercise their knowledge, judgement and expertise" in reaching their views (Johnston, 2008, p. 124). Johnston's analysis suggests that the "great bulk of normal science" (p. 139) examined in the RAE merits no more than a two-star rating, but his more interesting statement concerns quality:

> [My] analysis suggests that all that most of the panels and sub-panels have done is rewrite one set of relatively vague descriptors [provided by the RAE] into another: the words may be different but the imprecision is just the same so that, like pornography, academic excellence can be recognised but not defined! (Johnston, 2008, p. 131). [emphasis added]

Discussion and Conclusion

With this, we come full circle, and neatly illustrate one of the problems: the "quality as perceived attribute" (say, of originality) is being used as a substitute for a different meaning, "quality as exceptional." The brief judgment Johnston offers also shouldn't be missed: most of what is done in academic contexts, and that must by the very definition of the word be so, is not exceptional – so the frenzied pursuit of institutional "excellence" has an air of the quixotic about it, not unlike the charmingly absurd claim made by the humorist Garrison Keillor that he comes from a town "where all the children are above average."

There is a difference between the ranking of entire universities, evaluating the attainment of programmatic goals within a university, and an individual's experience-based judgment of the research that fellow academics have written up and hope to see published. They are all referred to, and subsumed, under the term 'quality.' Those different contexts should be kept in mind when employing the term. Perhaps more importantly, these are different types or aspects of quality, and it does a disservice to conflate them.

The point of the examples given above is meant to draw this out. The *exclusivity* of institutions in their selection process is one way one can distinguish what is exceptional (admitting one student out of five) from what is not so exceptional (admitting one student out of two). The *mission* a university sets for itself, and the means it identifies for doing so, enables one to pass clear judgments about whether, say, a physics department is doing all that it could to encourage a greater presence of women in the field. The 'shared understandings' of a field (or the socialization within it) as well as long exposure to what is published or researched in it, helps an individual scholar form a *judgment* as to the significance, say, of a particular contribution to that field. Those who have read many student papers over the years may find simpler ways to honor quality, and add a comment such as: "Your paper was insightful and well-crafted. I learned something I didn't know from reading it."

One can suggest something else, in particular with respect to the third definition (the one that smacks of rank subjectivism, the one that needs more justification) by looking at the definition of quality that suggests it is something that *sets the subject or object of our appraisal apart*. That doesn't mean "quality as distinctive" but rather "quality as a peculiar power, capacity, or virtue," one of its many dictionary definitions. Being an "exceptional university" doesn't (or shouldn't) connote virtue, nor is there anything about the ability of a university to meet its gender mission that suggests any peculiar power to do so. "Setting apart" also doesn't mean the research finding we read is necessarily 'better' (for that judgment, we invent separate, formal criteria) but it does mean that something about it makes

us sit up and take notice.

In that sense, I would like to suggest we think of an additional type, related to the third one: quality as *revelatory*. By that nothing religious is meant. Instead, if it is a book, then it is one "to conjure with," to discuss and debate, to test and argue over. It might offer a brand-new insight or perspective, or it could synthesize a corpus of material and draw succinct lessons from it. Consider, in support of this notion, a quantitative analysis undertaken to establish which 20th century books were most frequently cited in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (ISI, Philadelphia) from 1976 to 1983:

Table 2

The Ten Works Most Cited in the Arts & Humanities Citation Index

1. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) [855]
2. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922) [710]
3. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) [699]
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) [668]
5. Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax* (1965) [640]
6. Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1966) [488]
7. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967) [475]
8. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (1970) [454]
9. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927) [450]
10. Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948) [434]

Source: Garfield 1987; numbers in brackets are the total number of citations.

These titles reflect the discourse in literary criticism and philosophy of the day, and may or may not meet the criterion Mortimer Adler used in an earlier 'great books' list: to be considered 'great,' the work also had to be timeless – a judgment criterion. These titles also reflect the limited universe encompassed by A&HCI journal selection practices. These are also the kinds of works that when you first encounter them, they are likely to open your eyes, stimulate you, make you think differently. Revelatory works to conjure with.

In Latin, *educere* is the root of the word educe, hence related to education. It means to draw or bring out something hidden, latent or reserved; the job of an educator. It is an exceptional author who can write a book that educates the educators, opens their eyes. Certainly 'Great Books' at one time (cf. the University of Chicago curriculum in the

immediate postwar era) were fit for – one particular definition of – purpose, so one can argue for quality as revelatory here too. Whatever one might think about them, some have responded to the attributes they perceived in Foucault or Derrida as revelations.

My plea is not to multiply types of quality, though, merely to point out that Pirsig's notions may be worth pursuing if we are to understand the mysteries that lie behind, and within, our systems of peer review. We think it valuable to have those who know about our field judge our work, whether or not we fully understand what that judging involves.

My plea is a simpler one: that we be far more conscious that there are different types of quality, and that these different types have different contexts they are (more) suited to. Our 'clients' and 'customers', in the business-driven language we are forced to use nowadays, our students, are the ones who want a good, and if possible, a quality, education. To achieve that, we as educators need to see what we can draw out of those who trust we have something of worth to transmit to them.

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