DEFINING QUALITY EDUCATION IN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS: DIVERGENT VIEWS OF STAKEHOLDERS

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Quality education is an indicator for an institution's ability to provide tertiary education for the society besides being an instrument for the nation's economic growth. While numerous studies have been conducted in measuring the quality of education in higher learning institutions, defining the term has largely been overlooked by researchers. Moreover, whilst definitions of the term have also been highly contested, considerably vague and highly contextual, efforts should be invested in acquiring the definition for the term particularly from the various perspectives of the stakeholders of higher learning institutions. To this end, the present study was conducted by applying the qualitative approach to obtain views from the stakeholders of various Malaysian private higher learning institutions. 23 respondents ranging from the quality directors of the institutions, authorised personnel in tertiary education related government agencies, representatives of the National Association of Private Educational Institutions (NAPEI), employees of the institutions such as senior lecturers and administrative staff, students, prospective employers as well as parents, were interviewed. Content analysis was then utilised to analyse the feedback from the semi-structured interviews conducted. The interview results revealed divergent views representing the varying roles of the stakeholders in the education industry. Five categories of definitions were identified from the study. The first definition expressed by the majority of the respondents was *fulfilling satisfaction and meeting stakeholders' expectations* whilst *quality of graduates* as well as *teaching and learning* were ranked second and third, illustrating moderate agreement from the respondents. The definitions *accreditation* and *quality of lecturers* were ranked fourth and fifth respectively, as the ones least agreed upon by the respondents of the present study.

Keywords: Quality education, Higher learning institutions, Stakeholders, Divergent views.

Introduction

Quality in higher education has been extensively discussed in newspapers, journal articles as well as at local and international conferences. Besides the society's increased realisation of the importance of tertiary education (Arokiasamy, 2011), the educational sector's significant contribution to the country's GDP and economic growth has also received recognition from the government (Becket & Brookes, 2008). Notably, this has resulted in increasing competition among universities in their bid to attract students from across the globe. As a result, providing

quality has emerged as a strategy adopted by higher learning institutions (HLIs) to gain competitive advantage as well as to remain sustainable in the market place (Sohail *et al.*, 2003).

In general, quality is the capability of a product or service to meet customers' needs and expectations (Heizer & Render, 2011) or meeting customers' satisfaction (Bornman, 2004). Moreover, quality is related to the achievement of the desired outcomes and is greatly linked to costs (Langrosen *et al.,* 2004; Harvey & Green, 1993). Nevertheless, it can be a puzzling concept as the concept of quality is perceived differently based on individual roles in the product or service supply chain. Furthermore, the definition of quality continues to expand as the quality of a profession evolves and matures (Evans and Lindsay, 2005).

The educational sector also faces similar issues in defining quality education in higher learning institutions (HLIs). Tang and Hussin (2011) said that the concept of quality is more complicated in HLIs compared to manufacturing companies where criteria of end products are clearly prescribed. Harvey and Green (1993) stressed that the term quality education in HLIs is highly contested, considerably vague and highly contextual. Since the early 1980s, there has been a huge volume of published books and journal articles on the subject. Yet, the concept of quality education in HLIs is still commonly misrepresented and misunderstood by various academics (Doherty, 2008). This lack of agreement on the definition of quality education has created problems to educational practitioners and researchers who hold divergent views on quality in HLIs (Fion, 2009; Bornman, 2004). Fion (2009) also emphasised the need for a common and agreeable definition to be identified. Although doubts have been expressed in the literature on its definition, attempts to define the term should be done with caution (Woo, 2006). Furthermore, he added that priority should be given to the agreement on a common and acceptable definition for quality education in HLIs so that educational practitioners can share fundamental views on the term before further debating such issues.

As a result, the present study was conducted to analyse and assess how quality education in HLIs is defined by different stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs. Twenty three respondents who were external and internal stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs were identified. These included the quality director of the Malaysian private HLIs, authorised personnel in tertiary education related government agencies, representatives of the National Association of Private Educational Institutions (NAPEI), employees of institutions such as the senior lecturers and administrative staff, students, prospective employers of graduates as well as parents. Feedback and insights gained from this study are expected to be used as guidelines in strengthening quality initiatives as well as business strategies of the Malaysian private HLIs.

Literature Review

1. Quality Education in Higher Learning Institutions

There is no common definition for quality education which has been agreed upon by the researchers and practitioners in the area of quality in higher learning institutions (HLIs). Many of these stakeholders have emerged with their own definitions, according to their perceptions and experience in HLIs (Fion, 2009; Doherty, 2008; Woo, 2006; Bornman, 2004). One of the oldest and most cited articles pertaining to quality education in HLIs was written by Harvey and Green in 1993, in which the authors have grouped the quality education into five categories namely, exceptional, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation.

Evidently, the definition of quality education in HLIs differs for many authors although it can be concluded that there are three categories of definition that commonly emerged in the literature. Firstly, some defined quality education in HLIs as the three elements of educational system namely, quality of input, quality of process and quality of output (Cheng, 1995; Cheng and Tam, 1997; Sahney *et al*., 2008). The input of the educational system can be described as man power, tangible and intangible facilities as well as financial resources. This input will undergo specific processes such as administration, teaching and learning, research as well as knowledge transformation. The output that is expected to be produced at the end of educational system can be grouped as tangible and intangible output ranging from satisfaction of the stakeholders, salary, rate of employment and examination result (Becket & Brooke, 2008; Sahney *et al.,* 2004)

The other two categories were identified by Waaty (2003) who has classified quality education in HLIs into two schools of thought. Firstly, the author relates quality education in HLIs with the functions and activities of HLIs. For instance, the activities that link with students' intake and registration, developing academic programmes, hiring lecturers, process of teaching and learning as well as non-academic activities to assist the development of a student. A similar definition of quality education in HLIS is also highlighted in the World Declaration on Higher Education (1998) as that which comprises all their functions and activities such as curriculum, teaching faculty's qualifications, government, facilities, students' characteristics, management and administration as well as interactive networking.

According to the second school of thought, Waaty (2003) associates quality education in HLIs with stakeholders' definitions and approaches. This is the definition that gained prominence amongst previous researchers (Waaty, 2005). According to the author, the main advantage of applying a stakeholder approach in HLIs is the potential to recognise a number of different quality perspectives defined in the higher education environment. Moreover, for Harvey and Green (1993), quality education in HLIs is relative to the user of the term and circumstances in which it is invoked. There are many stakeholders in HLIs including students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, the government, and its funding agencies, accreditors, validators, auditors and assessors. Each has different perspectives on the same thing and also different perspectives on different things within the same level. Furthermore, due to different concerns on the achievement of quality education, different people may define quality education differently and may use different indicators to assess quality education in HLIs. As such, the definitions and indicators will not necessarily cover the three elements of the educational system which are the input, processes and outputs. The definitions that relate to the stakeholders' approach have been explained by Tang and Hussin (2011); Watty (2005); Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002); Cheng and Tam (1997); Owlia and Aspinwall (1997); Vroeijenstijn (1995); Harvey and Green (1993); Vroeijenstijn (1991) and Hughes (1988).

2. Stakeholders of Higher Learning Institutions

Previous researchers such as McNaught (2003) as well as Harvery and Green (1993) reported that there are many different stakeholders who have differing views on how educational institutions should be operated and what comprises quality education. Moreover, these different interest groups may attach different meanings to the term according to their different roles in this industry. As such, various stakeholders of the educational industry have their own perceptions of quality education.

Lewis and Smith (1994) defined the stakeholder in HLIs as an individual who has an effect on the educational system or is affected by it. The stakeholders are active participants in HLIs as well as have a direct involvement in deciding how quality is measured and/or are actively engaged in measuring and controlling quality (Fion, 2009). The stakeholders identified by Fion (2008) as well as Harvey and Green (1993) range from the students, parents, academic and administration staff, potential employers of the graduates as well as the institutions themselves.

In 2008, Fion identified three major groups of stakeholders for private HLIs in Malaysia. The first group is the government or specifically, the Ministry of Higher Education. The ministry plays an important role in the development and maintenance of quality education in private HLIs in Malaysia. The second group is classified as the intermediaries who represent the authority that deals with auditing or accrediting practises in the Malaysian education industry. The author identified the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) or professional bodies as those who belong in this group. The third group of stakeholders range from the institution itself to the students, parents, employees and potential employers of the graduates. The institutions involve the senior level management to academic and administrators that run and operate them.

Fion (2008) added that relationships exist between these groups and these relationships can be depicted in figure 1 with regard to the Malaysian educational environment.
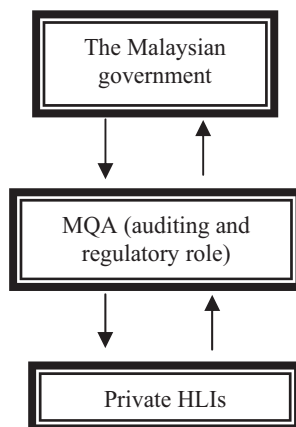
Figure 1. The relationship between the stakeholders involved in quality assurance - Malaysian practice (Source: Fion, 2008).

As for Becket and Brookes (2008), they classified the stakeholders of HLIs as either internal and external. The internal stakeholders focused on quality enhancement of the HLI in which their main aim is to increase the actual quality of teaching and learning through more innovative practices. On the other hand, external stakeholders are those concerned with quality assurance procedures that are usually imposed by the government and other external bodies such as accreditors and quality auditors (McKay & Kember, 1999).

Research Method

Qualitative Approach

The present study applied the qualitative approach to define quality education in HLIs from the viewpoints of various Malaysian private HLIs stakeholders. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to acquire feedback from the stakeholders. Each interview session lasted between 30 to 45 minutes.

Most of the respondents held managerial roles such as directors or deputy directors for the department of institutions/tertiary education related government agencies/companies and deans or deputy deans of faculties.   Twenty three respondents ranging from the quality directors of Malaysian private HLIs, directors or deputy directors for government related agencies, senior managers for private companies, representatives from the National Association of Private Educational Institutions (NAPEI), academic and administration staff of the Malaysian private HLIs, parents whose children had graduated from those institutions as well as final year students were identified.   Appointments were set for the interview session to be carried at the respondents' premises on the agreed date.

Data obtained from the interviews was qualitatively analysed by employing content analysis as recommended by Easterby-Smith et al. (2008). The first step in content analysis focuses on transcribing respondents' conversations.   The researchers then reviewed the interviews' transcription and applied the methods of analysing qualitative data outlined by Creswell (2009) and Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003). At the end stage, the definition for quality education in HLIs was delineated by clustering the definition according to the themes that emerged and subsequently, identifying the relevant sub-themes within those themes.

Findings

Respondents expressed divergent views when requested to define quality education in HLIs. Six respondents out of 23, of whom the majority held positions as quality directors of Malaysian private HLIs, defined it as fulfilling satisfaction and meeting the expectations of stakeholders. As explained by the Quality Director of HLI5 'Quality education in HLIs is something to do with learners' satisfaction and fulfilment of stakeholders' expectations".   The Quality Director of HLI4 also shared the same view ''Our main concern is meeting the stakeholders' expectations, providing quality education is actually not just meeting the stakeholders' expectations but go beyond what has been expected" and also 'the customer is not only satisfied with the service provided but they are delighted with the service' (Quality Director, HLI3).   However an interesting point was raised by a representative of Napei about fulfilling satisfaction and meeting stakeholders' expectations. Crystallising the term, he stated that 'As an institution you have to make sure that you deliver what you have promised. Deliver the promises as what been written in the document that institutions have submitted to the related government agencies. The content of the document are the things that are expected by those related government agencies for the institutions to deliver to their stakeholders'.

For the type of stakeholders, most of them agreed that students are their main priority. This was expressed by the Quality Director of HLI2 who stressed that 'Not only the diploma and degree, but also the services that provided by the Malaysian private HLIS to the customers especially to the students'. The Manager of Admissions and Records for HLI7 voiced a similar opinion besides highlighting the importance of students to the institutions, 'Whatever it is the

students are our priority as our income are coming from them but somehow rather they should follow our procedures'. Nevertheless, in order to deliver good services to students, support from all levels of management is essential. This was stressed by the Quality Director of HLI3, 'Quality comes along with many supports especially in teaching and learning process. It includes physical support and the 'murabi' lecturers (the lecturers that are concerned with students and sincere in delivering their lecture), the teaching and learning should be strengthened, environment must be good to make the customers happy. All parties must be committed in delivering good quality'.

The second type of stakeholder highlighted by the respondents in fulfilling satisfaction and meeting stakeholders' expectations are the prospective employers. This view was voiced by the Quality Director of HLI5 who stated that 'Basically our main stakeholders is the students, the second priority is the industry'. The Quality Director of HLI4 also observed that 'When the students are learning here their expectation is to get a good education in terms of treating them, teaching them and nurturing them. But the most important thing is whether we educate them enough to fulfil the job that they are supposed to do, that are fulfilling the other stakeholders' expectation which is the future employers'.

The second definition of quality education in HLIs emphasised by most of the respondents is the quality of graduates which was highlighted by five out of 23 respondents. A senior manager of a private company who supervised internship students from HLI2 described quality education in HLIs as 'The ability of the Malaysian private HLIs to produce quality students or graduates to the industry'. The opinion was also supported by Parent 1 who viewed quality education in HLIs as the ability of the institutions to produce compatible, prudent, and competent graduates that meet the requirements of the industry. These elements are important so that the graduates are able to face the challenges of the modern world which require both expertise and knowledge. In addition, Parent 2 emphasised that quality graduates can only be produced by the transformation process applied by the HLIs. He perceived quality education in HLIs as 'How the institutions can change or transform the student from 'nothing' to 'something' by the educators of the institution for the students to be accepted by the potential employers'.

Additionally, some of the respondents equated the term quality graduate with recognition from prospective employers. The Dean for the Faculty of Business in HLI6 expressed this idea as such, 'Recognition will not only come from the government related agency and professional bodies and it is no doubt because when the programme get approved by them it is clearly shows that we get recognition from them. The most important thing is getting the recognition from the industry or prospective employers of our graduates. The continuous recognition from them illustrates the marketability of our end products'. The marketing director of HLI8 explained the issue of quality graduates from a different angle as his institution offers a distance learning programme. He believed that the syllabuses of a programme are quite similar from one university to another university and the element that differentiates them is the output or graduates of those universities. He also added, 'our students are actually the working people therefore their intention of coming into our university is to improve their working life'. As a result, the employers' satisfaction is crucial for the graduates of this particular university in their bid to be promoted upon completion of their studies.

Teaching and learning was ranked third as the definition of quality education. As defined by the Quality Executive of HLI1 'Quality education in HLIs is more to the process of teaching and learning that mostly conducted by the lecturers to the students. It's more to the techniques or approaches that utilised by the lecturers in the process of teaching and learning'. A senior lecturer of HLI5 also suggested that the definition of teaching and learning as being, 'The

process that makes the students and lecturers think, quality education should involve the students and lecturers. Both parties should have the mentality to learn and develop'. The Director of tertiary education government agency 2 and Quality Director of HLI9 agreed with the importance of the teaching and learning process in producing quality graduates regardless of the quality of students entering the universities. According to the Quality Director of HLI9 'Among the three elements in the educational system, I think the most important element for this university is the process which is the process of teaching and learning. The student that we received may not so good but with an excellent process, quality graduates can be produced at the end of the programme'.

Other definitions that gained prominence are accreditation and quality of lecturers. Accreditation was mainly supported by the Director and Deputy Director for tertiary education government related agency 1. They were highly expected to endorse accreditation when asked to define quality education in HLIs as they represent the authorities that are heavily engaged in giving accreditation and approval for the programmes to be operated by Malaysian private HLIs. The definition ranked last is the quality of lecturers that was mostly explicated by the final year students of HLI2. This may be attributed to the fact that the lecturer is the person who is directly involved in the students' learning process. The students observed quality education in HLIs as having lecturers who are creative and innovative in delivering materials as well as being experts in their areas.

Table 1 illustrates the ranking of the definitions of quality education in HLIs as expressed by the stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs. It is evident that the definitions that gained prominence are Fulfilling satisfaction and Meeting stakeholders' expectations. The stakeholders who are viewed as being important are the students and prospective employers. The quality of graduates as well as teaching and learning are the definitions ranked second and third respectively. The fourth and fifth ranked definitions involved accreditation and quality of lecturers, as the least perceived by the respondents when asked to define quality education in HLIs.

Table 1. Ranking of definitions of quality education in HLIs by various stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs.

Ranking	Definitions
1	Fulfilling satisfaction and meeting stakeholders' expectations.
2	Quality of graduates
3	Teaching and learning
4	Accreditation
5	Teaching and learning

Discussion

Previous literature shows there is no definite answer in defining quality education in HLIs since it is is a multi-dimensional concept and cannot be easily assessed by only one indicator (Cheng & Tam, 1997). Therefore, it was not surprising that respondents in the present study expressed divergent views when they were requested to define quality education in HLIs.

Acquiring the definition for quality education in HLIs is vital as the definition may differ for different people (Hughes, 1998). Moreover, quality value in HLIs is perceived to be different for various HLI's stakeholders (Tang & Hussin, 2011). Each stakeholder might have different perspectives on the same thing and also different perspectives on different things within the same level (Harvey and Green, 1993). As a result, it is advisable to define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality education so that all these competing views are taken into account when assessing quality (Vroeijenstijn, 1991).

For the present study, five categories of definitions for quality education in HLIs were expressed by the stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs. Fulfilling satisfaction and meeting stakeholders' expectation is the category of definition that was viewed by the majority of the respondents. The perquisite to achieve this element is through delivering excellent services to the customers. This finding is consistent with prior research by Cheng and Tam (1997) who claimed that quality education in HLIs is about fulfilling satisfaction and meeting expectations of various customers and stakeholders. Even though quality education comprises the inputs, processes and outputs, effort should be focused to provide services that will satisfy both the internal and external constituencies by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations (Cheng, 1995). Furthermore as prescribed by Cheng and Tam (1997), whether the quality of education is referring to inputs, processes, outcomes or all of these, the definition of quality education may often be associated with fitness for use, satisfaction of strategic constituencies' needs or conformance to strategic constituencies' requirements and expectations.

The second definition that was highlighted by the respondents of this study is quality of graduates. This definition concurs with Tang and Hussin's (2011) that quality education in HLIs should not only produce academically good graduates, but also graduates with good character and meet industry expectations. Other responses to the definition included Teaching and learning which was ranked third. The definition was also stressed by Sahney et al. (2004) who suggested that the quality of teaching and learning is the central process for any education system. Also, teaching and learning is known as a formal process in transforming the student to skilful and competent graduates as required by the industry.

Accreditation and quality of lecturers were the definitions that gained least agreement from the respondents. They were ranked fourth and fifth respectively. Yet, accreditation is crucial as there is evidence that close monitoring and accreditation of academic programmes run by the universities will enhance the nation's quality education. Therefore, the accreditation process should be fully supported by the government, professional bodies, university staff and other stakeholders (Alani & Ilusanya, 2007).

A small number of those interviewed, being the students themselves, defined quality education in HLIs as quality of lecturer. Their roles are crucial in ensuring quality of teaching and learning process as it is the central process for any education system (Sahney et al., 2004). The point was underlined as lecturers hold key positions for quality assurance in higher education (Kettunen & Kantola, 2007).

The divergent views on quality education in HLIs revealed the different roles played by the stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs. The findings of the present study are consistent with

Tang and Hussin's (2011) observation that each stakeholder may perceive quality in different ways due to their differing interests in the HLIs. Furthermore, as stated by Harvey & Green (1993) different interest groups were attached to different meanings to the term. As such, the various stakeholders of the education industry have their own perceptions towards quality education. These divergent views also illustrated that a stakeholder approach in higher education has the capacity to elicit a potential number of quality definitions from different perspectives that need to be explored in the higher education environment (Waaty, 2005).

Divergent views on the definition of quality education in HLIs according to the different stakeholder roles can be described as follows:

Fulfilling satisfaction and meeting stakeholders' expectations is the definition that was mostly expressed by the quality director of the institutions. Indeed, they are the personnel who deal with the tertiary education government related agencies, professional bodies, industrial advisory panel, the institutions and the students. The professional relationship between these directors with the other stakeholders is one of the factors contributing to their realisation of the importance of fulfilling satisfaction and meeting expectations of the stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs. In addition, they also represent the authorities responsible for ensuring the successful implementation of quality practices for the institution.

The second definition that gained prominence was quality of graduates, as emphasised by prospective employers and parents. For the prospective employer, skilful and competent graduates are vital in helping the companies to achieve profit as well as non-profitable objectives. For parents, they expect their children to be employed by the public or private organisation as they have invested substantial amounts of money for their children's education.

Teaching and learning was the definition that was articulated mostly by the academic staff who are directly involved in the teaching and learning process. As expected, accreditation was highlighted by the director and deputy director of tertiary education for government related agencies as befits their roles being the authorities responsible for providing accreditation and approval for programmes to be run at the Malaysian private HLIs. The final definition was quality of lecturer which was largely highlighted by the students. The students perceived that quality lecturers are important as they are responsible for teaching, maturing and nurturing them during their learning process.

Conclusion

To date, a common and agreeable definition on quality education in HLIs is yet to be developed. As claimed by the Woo (2006) priority should be given to the agreement on a common and acceptable definition of quality education so that educational practitioners can share fundamental views before further debating educational issues. Therefore, the present study was undertaken to analyse how quality education in HLIs is defined by various stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs. A qualitative study was carried to acquire feedback from external and internal stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs. Specifically, they are the quality director of the institutions, authorised personnel in tertiary education related government agencies, representatives of the National Association of Private Educational Institutions (NAPEI), the employees of HLIs such as the senior lecturers and administrative staff, students, prospective employers as well as parents. Content analysis was applied in analysing the feedback from semi-structured interviews conducted with 23 respondents.

The current study found that fulfilling satisfaction and meeting stakeholders' expectation is the common definition given by majority of the stakeholders. It is interesting to note that

satisfaction and expectations of students are prioritised by Malaysian private HLIs followed by the prospective employers of the graduates. Quality of graduates as well as the teaching and learning process were ranked second and third as the definition that was frequently highlighted by the stakeholders. Two other definitions that gained least agreement from the stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs are accreditation and quality of lectures.

The findings of the present study provide greater insights into the perceptions of internal and external stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs on quality education in HLIs. The divergent views can impact on how these institutions formulate the strategies for their quality assurance department/unit as well as for the whole institution. Moreover, excellent business strategies will determine the sustainability of the institution in the increasingly competitive industry. It is suggested that further work needs to be done to quantitatively establish the ranking for the definitions. The ranking obtained in the present study was mainly developed from the opinions expressed by the respondents. A special tool used for ranking, called the Analytic Hierarchy Process can be employed in ranking the definition systematically and quantitatively. Also, it is recommended to obtain insights from a larger number of external and internal stakeholders of Malaysian private HLIs so that the findings can be generalised to the whole population.

Acknowledgments

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