

'Quality' – Closing the Gap

Abstract:

The aim of today's HE Institution is to provide a personal learning experience that will facilitate the acquisition of graduate skills and attributes (ENU: Stand out from the Crowd 2011). The aims of this goal include making them as fit as possible for the labour market, (ENU Strategy 2020) and logically fitter, if possible, for it than their peers from other Universities. So, is it working?

Some suggest not. Medhat, S., (2014) identified that industries are developing at an "astonishing rate" and the skills gap between the industries and the higher education facilities is, undeniably, increasing. He also found that 32% of companies that are heavily reliant on science disciplines found it difficult to find graduates with the necessary skills. And this study also found that 80% of a taught science degree based syllabus was misaligned with the developing industry trends. Graham *et al* (2010) suggested that the polarisation in the market coupled with a fall in graduate skill-sets is causing an increasing discrepancy.

While other research (OECD, 2010) has shown that some parts of Europe (Germany and Switzerland) have fewer unemployed graduates than UK, Graham *et al*, (2014) suggest that this is due to better educational alignment of their students with industry.

So where is the misalignment? Grochau, I. and ten Caten, C., (2012) indicate that accreditation has become "vital for survival" in Industry. Accreditation is achieved when an organisation can demonstrate that they have systems under control with the use of Quality procedures (ISO). Jickells and Negrusz, (2008) defined Quality as a "measure of excellence", where there are minimal or no variations and deficiencies in a business's final quality product and, therefore, is deemed "fit for purpose".

Therefore one suggestion is that there is a gap in the lack of preparedness of graduates to understand the place of Quality Management in the workplace. Some recent research honours undergraduate projects looked at how the teaching of Quality is perceived by students in LSSS and how Employers would view the employability of students with a better knowledge of Quality.

Smith, L., (2015) identified from a small study (permission given to use the information obtained) that employers are pre-disposed to employ applicants with a sound understanding of Quality compared with those who are not. See Table 1.



Table 1. Employers Responses. Smith, L., (2015)

However, the same project indicates that there is a significant variation in how teaching of Quality is perceived in LSSS. The variation reported suggests that a significant number are hardly taught Quality at all. See Table 2.

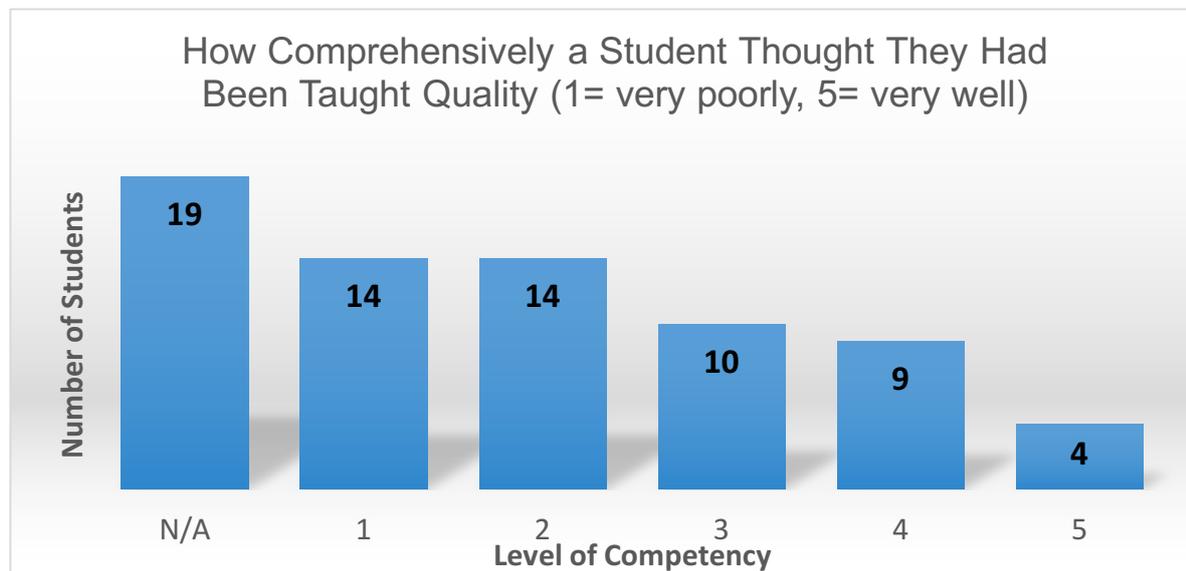


Table 2. U/G Student responses. Smith, L. (2015)

Further, from another undergraduate project by Douglas, J., (2015) (permission given to use the information obtained) there is a variation in what is even meant by Quality in the work place, including responses from undergraduates, staff and PhD students. Well over 80% found it difficult to give a clear definition of Quality in the workplace. See Table 3, and compare against the earlier definition by Jickells and Negrusz, (2008).

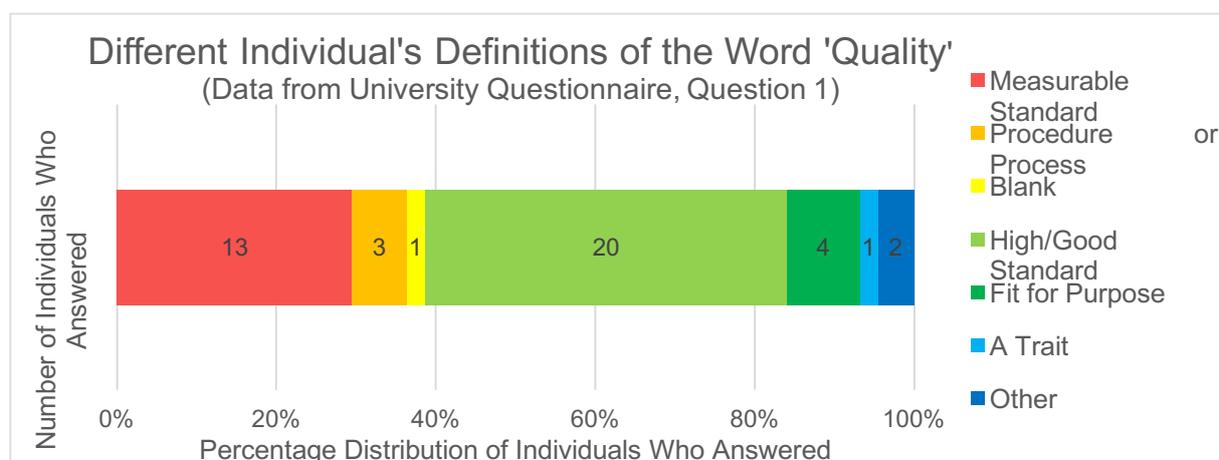


Table 3. Variation in perception of Quality defined by personnel at LSSS. (Douglas, J., 2015)

On the Forensic Biology (FB) programme in LSSS, we have taught Quality Management principles primarily using ISO/IEC 17025:2005 as an embedded subject on the programme for the past four years. The results show that we have consistently maintained a high level of appropriate employability (within the science and law sector) for our graduates over that time. It is also worth noting that these graduates were employed within 4 months of graduation with many within employment before the graduation ceremony. See Table 2.

Year of Graduation	% Graduates in legal and scientific sector within 4 months of graduation
2012-13	61.6
2013-14	85.8
2014-15	87.5

Table 2. Graduates of the FB Programme in Employment. 2012-2015

Whether this rate of employment is due to the USP can only be confirmed by the employers who have been taking significant numbers from our programme, such as Charles Rivers (Tranent).

Recommendation:

The innovative practice recommended is to teach Quality principles and Quality Management within modules as routine and for this topic to be embedded within modules using real life scenarios as recommended by Rodima *et al* 2005.

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