Why would going to university change anyone?

The challenges of capturing the transformative power of higher education in comparisons of quality

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Abstract. In this paper, I examine the tensions between the transformational potential undergraduate degrees and ways we have of measuring and comparing the quality of those degrees nationally and internationally. I argue that what makes higher education a higher form of education is the relations that students develop to knowledge through the study of particular bodies of disciplinary and professional knowledge. Given, this I argue that this needs to be central to the ways in which we understand and measure the quality of an undergraduate education. I review current ways of measuring quality and argue that they do not capture these aspects of an undergraduate education and so are not fit for purpose. In conclusion I argue that higher education researchers have a responsibility to develop more valid ways of comparing the quality of undergraduate degrees.

Keywords: Knowledge; Higher Education Research; Personal Transformation; Measuring Quality; Teaching and Learning; University Rankings.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I examine the tensions between understanding a university education in transformational terms and ways of measuring the quality of that education at a national and international level. In developing my argument in this paper, I bring together two strands of joint work with other researchers.

The first strand is the ESRC funded *Pedagogic Quality and Inequality University First Degrees* (PQI) project with Monica McLean from the University of Nottingham and Andrea Abbas from the University of Bath (see for example [Ashwin et al., 2012, 2014; McLean et al., 2013]). The PQI project was a three-year ESRC-funded investigation of sociology and related social science degree courses in four universities, which were given the pseudonyms Prestige, Selective,

Community, and Diversity Universities in order to reflect their different reputations. The departments at Prestige and Selective have been regularly rated in the top third of UK higher education league tables for their research and teaching in Sociology, whilst those at Community and Diversity have been regularly rated in the bottom third.

The second is work on European higher education policy with Manja Klemenčičfrom Harvard University [Klemenčič, Ashwin, 2015]. This involved bringing together a group of international researchers to examine recent developments in teaching, learning and assessment in higher education in the context of the future development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

2. Tensions between comparability and transformation

In order to see that personal transformation is a key aim of higher education, one only needs to consider the May 2015 Yerevan Communiqué by European Higher Education Ministers (see: http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/SubmitedFiles/5_2015/112705.pdf). The Communiqué is significant for those researching teaching and learning in higher education because it states that "Enhancing the quality and relevance of teaching and learning is the main mission of the EHEA" (p. 2). This is a major development given that teaching and learning did not even feature in the original discussions of the Bologna process (see [Sin, 2015]).

The Communiqué states that:

> By 2020 we are determined to achieve an EHEA where our common goals are implemented in all member countries to ensure trust in each other's higher education systems; where automatic recognition of qualifications becomes a reality so that students and graduates can move easily throughout it; where higher education is contributing effectively to build inclusive societies, founded on democratic values and human rights and where educational opportunities provide the competences and skills required for European citizenship, innovation and employment *(pp. 1–2).*

This statement is significant in two ways. First, it highlights the importance of the transformational elements of higher education in building inclusive and democratic societies. However, it also highlights the desire of policy makers to be able to meaningfully compare the quality of higher education degrees in order to build trust and allow the free movement of students and labour.

3. The transformational potential of undergraduate degrees

In the PQI project we found that the transformational nature of undergraduate degrees lies in changes in students' sense of self through their engagement with disciplinary knowledge [Ashwin et al., 2012, 2014]. This involved students relating what they were trying to achieve

in higher education to the disciplines that they were studying and to the world outside of the university. It involved seeing themselves as implicated in the knowledge that they were studying. In other words it involved them turning their disciplinary lens on their own lives in order to understand themselves in a different way.

For example, Esther said:

> There is no destination with this discipline…There is always something further and there is no point where you can stop and say 'I understood, I am a sociologist'. … The thing is sociology makes you aware of every decision you make: how that would impact on my life and how it could impact on someone else. And it makes the decision harder to make (Esther, Selective, Year 3, PQI project).

This does not always happen. It requires students to be intellectually engaged with their degree programme and to see it as an educational experience. This is dependent on both students and the quality of their educational experience.

Clearly the PQI project was focused on Sociology, which raises the question about whether such transformational relations with knowledge are particular to this kind of discipline or whether they are characteristic of higher education more generally. Table 1 below summarises the findings of studies in a range of discipline that have examined the ways that students talk about disciplinary knowledge in higher education. In each case, there is a basic account that is the least inclusive and focuses only on the immediately visible aspects of the discipline, a middle 'watershed' account [van Rossum, Hamer, 2010] in which students' begin to focus on personal meaning and that characterises an understanding of the discipline that is expected at undergraduate degree level; and a most inclusive account in which they go beyond personal meaning to see the discipline within a wider context.

The moves across the table suggest that whilst the changes in students' understanding of sociology have a particular sociological accent, the general shifts in focus appear to be common across those subjects in higher education where we have evidence about how students' perceptions of their discipline vary. In relation to Accountancy, Law, Mathematics, Music and Sociology it appears to shift from a focus on the immediate context (routine work, content, numbers, the instrument or opinions) to a focus on how this is formed into a system of meaning to a focus on how this relates to the students' position in relation to the world. The variation in geography and geosciences shift from the very general to interacting systems to the relation between these interacting systems and the world.

These two systems of variation suggest that the studying of all of these disciplines involves students in thinking about the relations between themselves, the world and the disciplines they are studying.

Table 1: **Variation in university students' accounts of their disciplines** (adapted from [Ashwin et al., 2014])

Discipline	Studies	Least inclusive account	'Watershed' account	Most inclusive account
Accountancy	Sin et al., 2012	Routine work	Meaningful work	Moral work
Geography	Bradbeer et al., 2004	General world	Structured into parts	Interactions
Geoscience	Stokes, 2011	Composition of earth—the earth	Processes—interacting systems	Relations earth and society
Law	Reid et al., 2006	Content	System	Extension of self
Mathematics	Wood et al., 2012	Numbers	Models	Approach to life
Music	Reid, 2001	Instrument	Meaning	Communicating
Sociology	Ashwin et al., 2015	Opinions	Study of Society	Many sociologies implicating student

Thus the arguments made earlier about the transformational nature of undergraduate higher education would appear to be relevant to these other disciplines, even if the precise nature of the transformation is different within different disciplines.

So far the argument in this paper has focused on the transformational potential of the knowledge that students engage with in higher education. However, an undergraduate experience is not just about the knowledge that students encounter. Take for example this quote from Faith from the PQI project:

> [I am a] totally different person. Even dress sense. Everything has changed, everything. I would go to a lecture in a tracksuit before, now I would not get caught dead in one ... I think the older I grow the more I realise that first impressions count ... You never know who you are going to meet. You never know what network event may come up in the evening. You can't go looking like a tramp. You've just got to be a lot more aware of different aspects of yourself and be more confident. (Faith, Year 3, Prestige, PQI project)

Here Faith is talking about how her sense of who she is has been changed through the networking opportunities that she experienced at university. In the project we found that whilst such opportunities were an important part of some students' changing sense of who they are, what was crucial was that this was in the context of seeing being at university as an educational experience as well as a social experience. Students who did not appear to see being at university as an educational experience were less likely to develop more inclusive accounts of knowledge and were less likely to have personal projects that were focused on changing themselves and the world.

If we return to the question in the title of this paper, then we now have the makings of an answer. The transformational nature of higher education lies in the access they gain to a body of disciplinary knowledge that changes their sense of both who they are and the nature of the wider world.

4. The comparability of undergraduate degrees

Having argued that a key element of what is offered by undergraduate education is the transformational relations that students develop to knowledge, I now examine ways of comparing the quality of undergraduate degrees. There are strong pressures for the measurement of how students benefit from higher education to ensure equitable higher education for all students regardless of which institution they study in. The legitimacy of these demands needs to be recognised as governments, students and societies invest considerable resources in higher education.

However, the current ways we have of measuring quality are deeply problematic because they do not provide access to understanding of the ways in which students are transformed by their higher education experience. To show this I will examine two approaches to the comparison of higher education quality: university rankings and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project (see [Ashwin, 2015] for a further development of these arguments).

4.1. Comparability 1: University Rankings

The dominate way of comparing the quality of undergraduate degrees are national and international higher education rankings. It is important to be clear about the strengths of these rankings that have led to their dominance. First, they appear to be easily comprehensible because they provide a simple ranking of universities. These rankings can travel across a number of contexts and audiences. They make apparent sense to universities, to students, to policy makers, and to employers, who feel that they know what is meant by being a top 10 university nationally or a top 100 university internationally. However, this apparent simplicity and meaningfulness conceals a whole range of problems with the validity of such rankings.

First university rankings tend to involve unrelated and incomparable measures that are then aggregated into a single score. This incomparability makes this single score is essentially meaningless. Equally the rankings that are then produced are based on differences in these scores that have no statistical significance. Thus differences in the rankings that look very large because they are separated by many places can actually be very small.

Second, university rankings tend to use measures and ways of combining measures that favour higher status institutions. The reason for this is fairly obvious. Most of the audiences for university rankings already have a strong sense of which universities they think are

high quality. If a university ranking does not have the universities that "everyone knows" are the best at the top, then there is something wrong with that ranking. This means that the compliers of university rankings need to be careful to ensure the credibility of their rankings by having most of the socially prestigious universities near the top of their ranking. It is partly for this reason that most university rankings have little or no metrics which directly relate to the quality of teaching in universities and instead prefer highly questionable measures of teaching, such as staff-student ratio, which favour more prestigious, resource-rich institutions.

The result of this is that most university rankings tend to be relatively stable, with the most prestigious institutions grouped towards the top of the ranking. These higher status institutions tend to enrol a much greater proportion of privileged students. This means that rankings tend to reinforce privilege because, whilst they contain very little or no valid data on the quality of university teaching, they strongly suggest that students who attend these universities have experienced a higher quality education than other students. Another factor in this is that many rankings of universities focus on quality at the institutional level rather than quality at the level of particular programme, despite the fact that we know that the same institution can have some programmes that are of very high quality and some that are of much lower quality.

As well as telling us little or nothing about the quality of teaching in universities, these rankings also tell us nothing about the transformational potential of different degree programmes in different institutions. They tell us nothing about the relationships that students develop to knowledge through their engagement in a particular degree course or the ways that they their sense of who they are is changed through studying. It may seem to be asking a little much of rankings to provide this kind of information. However, if the higher nature of higher education lies in the ways that students are transformed by their relations to knowledge then this is something that measures of quality should be designed to tell us about.

4.2. Comparability 2: Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO)

The OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project seeks to compare the quality of what students learn in different institutions and countries. It is of interest in the light of our discussion of rankings because Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's Director for Education and Skills, has claimed that AHELO offers a way of addressing the distortion caused by institutional prestige when considering issues of educational quality (see [Morgan, 2015]).

It is made up of four elements: a disciplinary element which is focused on measuring students' learning outcomes in economics and engineering; a generic skills element that is aimed at all disciplines; the collecting of contextual information; and an element focused on the estimation of value-added (see [Tremblay et al., 2012; OECD,

2013a; 2013b]). In discussing AHELO, I will focus on the disciplinary and generic skills elements.

It is no surprise that the disciplinary element has focused its attention on Economics and Engineering where curricula tend to be much more consistent internationally. However, it is much more difficult to know what internationally comparable curricula in the study of say literature, sociology, or education would look like. This is because these disciplines and fields have curricula that are shaped by national traditions and interests. Developing internationally comparable curricula could dramatically and damagingly change the nature of what it means to teach and learn such subjects in universities.

The AHELO response to this has been to develop generic skills tests for other disciplines. These are argued to be outcomes that are not specific to any particular subject but would be desired by students in any discipline. This means they completely ignore the personal relationships that students develop with particular bodies of knowledge. These measures of generic skills are largely meaningless because they are based on the mistaken notion that we either have good or bad 'communication', 'critical thinking', 'learning', or 'teaching' skills regardless of the particular task and context in which we are engaged. Skilful performances are shaped more by our understanding what is at stake in particular tasks and our interactions with other people and things than they are by supposedly transferable skills.

If we assume for a moment that the problems discussed in relation to AHELO's disciplinary and generic skills elements are mistaken, then what would be likely to happen if AHELO became a globally significant and respected measure of the quality of students' learning outcomes? As Hazelkorn [2015] argues, measures which set out to support student choice tend to end up being tools by which institutions position themselves globally. Thus if AHELO were successful, then universities would clearly need to take their students' performance in the generic skills tests very seriously. The predictable outcome is that they would invest time and resources in preparing their students to undertake these tests.

This would not tell us about the quality of students' engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge or their ability to perform in the workplace. It would primarily tell us about how much time they had spent preparing to take these kinds of generic tests. In this way AHELO suffers from the same problems of the other 'proxies' that it seeks to replace. It would not help to improve the quality of higher education because it would simply make students better versed in completing generic comprehension exercises. Crucially, it would be very unlikely to reduce the impact of historical institutional hierarchies because the wealthier an institution, the more resources it would have available to prepare its students for taking the assessments. Thus if AHELO succeeded, then the likelihood is that over time it would serve to reinforce existing hierarchies rather than challenge them.

5. A Key Tension for HE Researchers

So far I have focused on the tension between the importance of the transformational potential of undergraduate degrees and the desire to compare the quality of undergraduate degrees. However, we also face a tension as higher education researchers. This tension is between the distorting tendency of comparisons that I have focused on in this paper and the legitimacy of the need for such comparisons. As higher education researchers we need to do more than critique comparisons, we also need to help to develop ways of comparing that are less distorting. This is because there are legitimate reasons for wanting to understand the quality of higher education that is offered in different settings. Simply ruling out all comparisons ignores the strength of these claims and leaves the field open for ways of comparing that, as we have seen, are very poor measures of quality and serve primarily to reinforce institutional and social privilege.

6. Concluding questions

In concluding this paper, I want to raise three questions about how we might compare the quality of undergraduate education. First, how can we generate comparisons that are less distorting? The key to answering this question is to recognise the limitations of any measurement of this form of quality. All measures of quality are blunt tools that can only tell us something meaningful in very broad terms. One of the major problems with university rankings is that they convey a very misleading impression of highly calibrated judgments, which, as we have seen, are largely meaningless. Thus we need to be very careful not to demand more of any alternative measure than is actually captured by existing measures.

Second, how can we make comparisons that reflect Higher Education's role in helping students to gain access to transformative knowledge? This is a major challenge. However, if we accept that the defining feature of *higher* education is the way that it transforms students' sense of themselves and the world, then this needs to be a key element of how we measure quality. This is because the ways in which we choose to measure quality end up defining what quality is. Measures that start out as proxies end up becoming the embodiment of quality. Therefore, we need to be intelligent about the measures we choose and take on the difficult challenge of developing measures that capture transformation.

In developing such measures, it is important to be clear that most forms of measurement of quality are expensive. This raises our final question: if we are to put time and resources into developing measures of quality then would it not be more sensible to do this in a way that also enhances quality? It is likely that any effective way forward for measuring the extent to which going to university changes students will also help to improve universities' ability to support such transformation.

In developing alternative approaches, it is important to be clear of two things that get obscured in the Rankings and AHELO approaches to measuring quality. First, based on decades of research, we already have a very good understanding of the factors that lead to high quality learning in higher education. This understanding should be the basis of how we seek to compare the quality of undergraduate education. For example, these are clearly expressed in the 10 principles of teaching and learning that came out of the UK Teaching and Learning Research Programme (see [Ashwin et al., 2015] for a working through of these principles in relation to higher education).

Second, we need to be clear about the limits of what an undergraduate education is intended to offer. Despite the rhetoric from some policy makers including those within higher education, degree results or any form of assessment can never tell us what kind of employee or citizen an individual will become. At best they can tell us about students' engagement with particular bodies of disciplinary and professional knowledge. This means that we need to avoid grandiose claims about what a robust measure of the quality of higher education can provide to students, employers and policy makers.

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