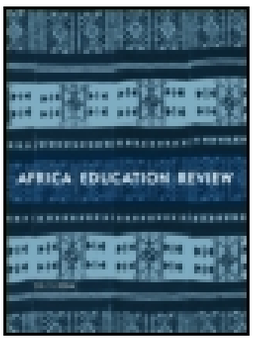

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ARTICLE

Unravelling Quality in Higher Education: What Say the Students?

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Abstract

The extant literature on quality assurance in higher education points to a dearth of empirical studies on students' conceptions of quality in higher education. This interpretivist article reports on a study that explored the conceptions of quality in higher education by final year undergraduate students in six academic disciplines at Makerere University, Uganda. Data for the article was collected from 50 final year students in eight discipline-specific focus group discussions and was analysed using thematic analysis. Four conceptions of quality in higher education were evident from the participants' responses, namely: quality as transformation (value-added); quality as fitness for purpose; quality as excellence; and quality as consistency/perfection (zero-errors). Nevertheless, transformation and fitness for purpose featured as the dominant conceptions of quality in higher education and these conceptions of quality did not take place in a vacuum. The students rationalised transformation and fitness for purpose by what they perceived the purpose of higher education to be. The multiple and yet competing purposes of higher education occasioned the two definitions of quality in higher education. Therefore, consensus on the meaning of quality can be hastened by arriving at a common purpose of higher education in a given society rather than engaging with the notions of quality themselves. This thinking presupposes the idea that the purpose of higher education varies across time and space and the definition of quality in higher education should be responsive to the prevailing purpose(s) of higher education in a given society.

Keywords: conceptions; quality; higher education; students

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Introduction

Defining quality, as a *sine qua non* for assuring and enhancing it, has been one of the preoccupations in higher education since the 1990s (Harvey and Green 1993; Harvey and Knight 1996; Lomas 2002). This is premised on the notion that "one must know what quality [in higher education] is before determining how to assure it" (Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant and Crawford 2015, 7). This realisation has led to a proliferation of studies on stakeholders' conceptions of quality in higher education (Brown 2010; Kalayci, Watty and Fahriye 2012; Lomas 2002; 2007; Villanueva 2012; Watty 2005; 2006a) and precipitated calls for empirical studies on stakeholders' conceptions of quality in higher education (e.g. Kasozi 2003). Nevertheless, most studies on the subject focus on academics and senior managers in universities (Brown 2010; Kalayci, Watty and Fahriye 2012; Lomas 2002; 2007; Vann 2012; Villanueva 2012; Watty 2005; 2006a; 2006b). Resultantly, little empirical research has been done into students' conceptions of quality in higher education (Gavra, Ivanova, Stråhlman and Palomares 2012; Hill, Lomas and MacGregor 2003; Jungblut, Vukasovic and Stensaker 2015; Zachariah 2007) despite students being the foremost and immediate beneficiaries of higher education (Maniku 2008). Similarly, the extant studies pay less attention to the antecedents of conceptions of quality and therefore little is known about the determinants of students' conceptions of quality in higher education. In light of the above, this article reports on a study that asked the following research question: How is quality in higher education conceptualised by students at Makerere University, Uganda, and why is it conceptualised that way?

The article is structured in five parts. The first part is this introductory section. The second part is the literature review that delves into notions of quality and empirical studies on conceptions of quality; and the third part presents the methods of the study. The fourth part presents the findings of the study; while the final part discusses the study results; highlights the limitations of the study; and points out the possibilities for further research.

Literature Review: Quality in Higher Education

Scholars who venture into the challenging task of defining quality at times refer to the dilemma of quality as articulated by Pirsig (1974, 179):

> Quality … you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no-one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes, it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes, it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously,

> some things are better than others … but what's the "betterness"? So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding any place to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it?

This excerpt demonstrates the challenge of defining quality. With regard to higher education, it can be observed that while the concern for quality has been pervasive since the mid-1980s, a single definition of quality is elusive and unlikely to emerge (Cheng and Tam 1997; Maniku 2008; Sanyal 2013).

Conceptions of quality in higher education have been propounded by Astin (1980) and Harvey and Green (1993). Astin (1980) offers the following five main conceptions of quality for the "modern university", namely, the mystical, reputational, resources, outcomes, and value-added views. The mystical conception reflects the view that "quality simply cannot be measured because the activities of higher education are too complex, variable and subtle" (Skolnik 2010, 7). The reputational view, as the name suggests, hinges on how people think about the status of a university. It also connotes the recognition of the university by stakeholders and can be manifested in the university's ranking and rating. The resources view judges the quality of a university on the basis of its resources, such as students, teaching staff and financial capacity. The outcomes view assesses the quality of the graduates of a higher education institution (HEI). Finally, the value-added view emphasises the impact of an HEI on the students' academic and personal development.

Harvey and Green (1993, 11–28) have contributed some of the useful conceptions of quality that are extensively used in higher education by grouping the notion of quality into five discrete but interrelated ways of thinking, namely: (1) quality as exceptional (exceeding high standards and passing required standards); (2) quality as perfection (exhibited through "zero defects" and "consistent and flawless outcome"); (3) quality as fitness for purpose (meaning that the product or service meets the stated purpose, customer specifications and satisfaction); (4) quality as value for money (through efficiency and effectiveness, return on investment); and (5) quality as transformation (in terms of qualitative change, enhancement/empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge).

There is a dearth of studies on students' conceptions of quality in higher education. In an extant quantitative study on conceptions of quality by students, academics and employers in the Sultanate of Oman, Zachariah (2007) established that transformation was the most preferred definition of quality by students. Another noteworthy finding from Zachariah's study is that the consistency notion of quality found strongest support among students. Jungblut, Vukasovic and Stensaker (2015) conducted a study on students' perspectives of quality in eight European countries and established that the students were very homogeneous with regard to quality as transformation/added value perspectives. However, they were somehow less homogeneous with regard to the quality as fitness for purpose perspective, and rather polarised with regard to quality as value

for money. The study brought out three out of the five typologies of quality by Harvey and Green (1993). A notable gap in these studies is that they merely identify conceptions of quality that exist but do not delve into why those conceptions exist. Finally, the studies anchor their findings in Harvey and Green's (1993) analytical framework of quality in higher education and do not attempt to identify other likely conceptions of quality in higher education.

Methods

The study was conducted at Makerere University main campus based in Kampala, Uganda. Makerere University was established in 1922 and comprises nine colleges, namely, the: College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences; College of Business and Management Sciences; College of Computing and Information Sciences; College of Education and External Studies; College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology; College of Health Sciences; College of Humanities and Social Sciences; College of Natural Sciences; and College of Veterinary Medicine, Animal Resources and Bio-Security.

A case study design was adopted for the study. The choice of the case study design was informed by two principal considerations. Firstly, the research question justifies a case study. Yin (2003) argues that a case study is justifiable when questions of "how" and "why" are to be answered. The research question combines "how" with "why". Finally, the study aimed to "optimise understanding of the case rather than to generalise beyond it" (Stake 2005, 443). This is consistent with Yin (2003, 10) who argues that "case studies are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes".

The study employed purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Multi-stage purposive sampling was used to select colleges, schools and departments, while convenience sampling was used to select students from each academic programme to participate in focus group discussions. Table 1 shows how the sampling was conducted.

Table 1: Sample selection procedures and sample size

College	School	Department	Programme	Number of respondents
College of Education and External Studies	Education	Humanities and Language Education	Bachelor of Arts with Education	6
		Science, Technical and Vocational Education	Bachelor of Science with Education	6

College	School	Department	Programme	Number of respondents
College of Humanities and Social Sciences	Liberal and Performing Arts	Philosophy and Development Studies	Bachelor of Development Studies	7
		Performing Arts	Bachelor of Arts in Drama and Music	7
College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology	Engineering	Civil and Environmental Engineering	Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering	6
		Electrical and Computer Engineering	Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering	6
College of Health Sciences	Health Sciences	Dentistry	Bachelor of Dental Surgery	6
		Nursing	Bachelor of Nursing	6
Total				**50**

Four out of the nine colleges of the university were purposively selected as shown in Table 1. Merriam (1998, 61) asserts that "purposive sampling in based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learnt". The selection of colleges was purposively done to ensure that the resultant sample of students would comprise those undertaking hard-applied disciplines (Dental Surgery and Engineering), soft-applied disciplines (Nursing, Education, and Music, Dance and Drama), and a soft-basic discipline (Development Studies). The sample that was based on the above classification of academic disciplines was intended to understand whether there are similarities in or differences between conceptions of quality in higher education across the hard-applied disciplines, soft-applied disciplines, and soft-basic disciplines.

From each college, one school was purposively selected from which two academic departments were then purposively selected. One academic programme was purposively selected from each of the sampled departments. The eight programmes reflect six different disciplines, namely, Engineering, Dentistry, Nursing, Education, Music and Drama, and Development Studies.

Between six and seven final year undergraduate students undertaking each of the sampled academic programmes were selected using convenience sampling; as a result, 50 students were sampled. Convenience sampling was preferred because it is least costly in terms of time, effort and money (Marshall 1996). The main assumption associated with convenience sampling is that the members of the target population are homogeneous

(Ross 2005). Homogeneity of the students was assumed because the sampled students from each programme were undertaking that particular programme and were in their final year of study. Final year undergraduate students were used as participants because they were in a position to provide information relating to quality since they had spent considerable time at the institution.

The data for the study was collected from 1 April to 1 July 2014 using focus group discussions. Each focus group comprised male and female participants under the age of 30. Though follow-up questions were asked, data collection was guided by the following questions:

1. When we talk of trying to improve quality in higher education, what is it that we should be trying to improve?
2. What do you trace your beliefs about quality to? Where do your beliefs about quality come from?

Each discipline-based focus group discussion lasted 90 minutes and was recorded using a sound recorder with the respondents' consent. Each recording was immediately transformed from voice to text. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, presented in a narrative form, and substantiated by excerpts from the focus group discussions. To ensure confidentiality, the programme of study is used to identify the respondents in the article.

Results: Students' Conceptions of Quality in Higher Education

Four viewpoints of quality in higher education emerged from the students' responses. Nevertheless, the dominant conceptions of quality that featured in the eight focus group discussions were quality as transformation, fitness for purpose and exceptional. The consistency notion of quality in higher education was insignificant because it emerged from only two students in a single focus group discussion.

Quality as Transformation

The value-added or transformative notion emerged as the dominant conception of quality in higher education among students. Generally, three variants of transformation were explicit in the data, namely: (1) transformation as acquiring subject knowledge and skills; (2) transformation as acquiring generic (employability) skills; and (3) transformation as developing personal attributes.

Subject Knowledge and Skills

The students' responses underscore the centrality of subject knowledge and skills as an incontestable indicator of quality in higher education. Subject knowledge was viewed in terms of the students' demonstration of a thorough grasp of the key concepts, principles and theories associated with a field of study upon completion of the undergraduate experience. Consequently, a graduate of higher education should be able to explain subject-specific concepts, principles and theories. Asked about what quality in higher education meant, a final year Music and Drama student said:

> To me, quality in higher education comes in when outgoing students or graduands are capable of showcasing what they have learned. If … you cannot explain any phenomenon [that you learnt] after coming from campus (university), then that is not quality education … It means [that] you got poor quality education or you are under-qualified.

The conception of quality in the above excerpt emphasises the idea that higher education should address the cognitive domain.

Besides subject knowledge, quality education should be capable of imparting subject skills. A final year Nursing student succinctly advanced the idea of higher education developing subject skills:

> For me, I would think that quality in education is when the students are expected to perform (sic) the skills and competencies that are expected of that [study] programme. So, when they graduate but they lack those skills that are required of the programme, then I wouldn't regard the education that they received as quality education.

Furthermore, transformation was conceptualised in terms of the ability of the products of higher education to perform or execute tasks that are in line with their degree programmes:

> Quality is about the product of education; how good the product is. If [for example] I can't do what I am expected to do as an electrical engineer, then I think the quality of education [that I received] was not all that good. (Final year Electrical Engineering student)

> To me quality education entails, like if someone after acquiring education or getting his or her paper (degree), that person should be able to deliver to the required skills [sic] at work. (Final year Dental Surgery student)

> I always believe in the fact that the end will always justify the means. So if you are out of the university, what is it that you can do? What are some of the skills that you got from the university? But you find that someone is out of the university and he/she cannot do anything as far as what he/she studied [is concerned]. (Final year Science Education student)

The students preferred practical sessions as a prerequisite for developing field-specific practical skills in addition to field-specific theoretical knowledge. There was consensus among the students that the theoretical components outweigh the practical elements on some degree programmes. To illustrate how teaching on the programmes is skewed towards theory, a Civil Engineering student said:

> We have been pumped with too much theory; that is a fact.

While a Development Studies student echoed:

> Practical skills should also be emphasised. Most … lecturers base [sic] on theoretical teaching only neglecting practicals.

Finally, Music and Drama students lamented that while the programme is practical in nature, the theoretical component accounts for about 80 per cent of the programme.

Arising out of the imbalance between theory and practice, a final year Electrical Engineering student lamented his inability, and probably that of most of the focus group members, to wire a house or repair an electric kettle even though he was a few months away from completing the study programme:

> … being practical enough is the main issue here. Because if you finish your four years down the road and someone is calling you to just fix … his electrical kettle … and … you can't fix it for [sic] the four years you have been at this college offering [a] Bachelor's Degree in Electrical Engineering, then that is not quality enough and actually I am very sure that many people (students) can't do that.

Another Electrical Engineering student rebutted the student's perceived skill deficiency. The student considered teaching Electrical Engineering students to wire a house or repair an electric kettle as asking a university to provide technical education rather than higher education:

> … as an engineering student, you may think [that] you need so much practical like may be wiring. But for me, engineering is concerned with understanding the science of technology. So, it is not practical per se. For example, an [electrical] engineer may have four higher technicians and 16 artisans at the place of work. He is [therefore] supposed to manage them and get a practical output… because also there is management of producing good results. Therefore, as engineering students, what we need is to have an appreciation of the science of engineering. They ask you your responsibility as an engineer and then you start telling them [that] fixing bulbs and repairing kettles. I find it funny for fourth year [Electrical Engineering] students to think that they must know how to repair a kettle.

This contestation among students, albeit of the same subject area, regarding the level of attainment (or skills) expected of an engineering graduate provokes a fundamental question: What is it that makes higher education higher? While some of the students

opined that higher education should impart basic skills, others were of the view that higher education should develop high-order skills or skills needed to solve complex problems. To the latter group, developing low-level skills, such as repairing a kettle, can be construed as relegating higher education to skills training or vocationalising higher education. Regardless of these contestations, both camps of students advance the transformative or value-added view of quality in higher education.

Generic (Employability) Skills

The students were of the view that the higher education process should balance the acquisition of subject skills with generic skills. In other words, the students considered subject skills to be a necessary but insufficient outcome of the university experience. A Civil Engineering student aptly illustrated this:

> The university should be able to offer more than the technical (subject) skills [to students].

This was corroborated by a Dental Surgery student:

> Knowledge pertaining to the discipline is just one part of quality [higher education]. If you are talking about quality education, you are just not looking at what they are teaching or the discipline.

During the interviews, the students identified teamwork, interpersonal skills and communication skills, decision-making, problem solving skills, leadership skills, analytical skills and entrepreneurship skills as outcomes of the higher education experience of a student. In relation to entrepreneurship skills, students considered quality higher education a kind of education that empowers learners to become job creators rather than job seekers. According to a final year Dental Surgery student:

> Quality education is that which guides someone into creating their own jobs other than seeking for already made jobs. Arguably, the skyrocketing graduate unemployment in Uganda has partly influenced students' identification with job creation.

Finally, an endeavour was made to establish why the students identified with the transformation notion of quality. The reason for perceiving quality as transformation was clearly illustrated by a Music and Drama student:

> … at the end of the day, you enter the university when you are green. So, you should not go out of the university at the same level. So, when you go [out] when you have transformed for the better, you may transform negatively but we are talking about positive transformation – one can conclude that you received quality [higher] education.

This view emphasises the value-addition role of the university and the centrality of the student in the quality discourse. Therefore, quality in higher education should be judged by the extent to which the university experience enhances the graduates' knowledge and skills, and cultivates their values, attitudes and personality.

Quality as Fitness for Purpose

This notion emerged as the second dominant viewpoint of quality in higher education among the students. The students' responses in relation to fitness for purpose can be encapsulated into relevance. Three major variants of relevance were apparent in the data, namely: alignment of higher education with the needs of society (or socio-economic needs); capacity of higher education to meet the needs of the labour market; and the employability of graduates.

The variant of relevance that received unrivalled attention was the alignment of higher education with the needs of society or the degree to which the products of higher education are able to address the contemporary challenges of society. Consistent with the foregoing, an Electrical Engineering student described quality higher education as:

> It [quality higher education] is that kind of education that addresses the developmental needs of society.

This conception of relevance relates to a higher education system. At institutional level, a quality HEI is evidenced by the quality of the graduates. In this regard, the graduates must fit the socio-economic needs of the country. Asked about the defining feature of a quality university in the context of Uganda, an Arts Education student responded:

> For me I believe a quality university is that university that produces students or graduands who … can meet societal needs.

This viewpoint of quality higher education requires HEIs to ensure correspondence between the skills acquired by the students and the future needs or challenges of society.

An Electrical Engineering student, in his description of quality in higher education, gave a rich narrative that demonstrates the pivotal role of higher education in addressing the needs and challenges of society and accelerating development:

> Every society has needs; every society has challenges that need solutions. So, if someone has [sic] to solve those challenges, they should be equipped with the knowledge [and skills] to meet those challenges and they can only get equipped with this knowledge if they get education. If that education is able to equip them with the skills to solve the challenges of society, then that is quality education.

The above view demonstrates that there should be a nexus between higher education and society. In other words, higher education should play the role of an instrument for positive change in the social and economic facets of society.

Relatedly, quality is implied when an HEI's academic programmes are relevant to the needs of society. Put differently, the curricula must be relevant to national development. The students deemed the curriculum to be the bedrock of relevance as evidenced by a of Development Studies student:

> I think one way of identifying a better university can be through the kind of courses it offers and their relevance to society.

The second variant of relevance is meeting the expectations of stakeholders and employers in particular. This was illustrated by a Dental Surgery student:

> I think quality [higher] education is that which is able to meet the expectations of stakeholders. It could be your employers, it could be your community, or it may be the people at work.

With respect to employers, it is incontestable that they expect a nexus between higher education and the world of work or to acquire university graduates with relevant and readily usable skills in the labour market. Such skills would enable the graduate employees to make a meaningful contribution to organisations at the commencement of employment and reduce the learning curve.

The final variant of relevance is employability of graduates. This viewpoint did not come as a surprise since the initial obsession of students is to secure employment and they view higher education as a preparatory phase for an occupation. The students alluded to two dimensions of employability. The first dimension relates to the period between graduation and obtaining a first job regardless of whether it is a graduate job or not. The second dimension hinges on either the recognition or non-recognition of an HEI's awards by the labour market. A Development Studies student encapsulated these two aspects in the following statement:

> … when it comes to employment, after the course [or programme], how often (sic) are you able to get [be] employed? You find [that with] some universities, even after graduating, you go [to look for a job armed] with your paper (degree certificate), they (employers) just chase you away.

Therefore, the employability perception of quality envisions a relationship between higher education and employment and is prompted by the unrelenting graduate unemployment in Uganda. The second dimension of employability points to two attention-grabbing aspects, which are relevant for quality assurance in higher education. The first aspect is that there is *de jure* accreditation of universities and their study programmes by the regulatory authority, the National Council for Higher Education, and *de facto* recognition of HEIs by sections of the labour market. This means that

recognition of an HEI by a higher education regulatory body is not a guarantee that employers will recognise qualifications from that institution.

Certainly, the students identified with fitness for purpose as a notion of quality in higher education and their association with this notion is not accidental; it has been mediated by context. The first contextual influence relates to the students' perceived purpose(s) of higher education. Judging from how they deciphered quality in higher education, the students explicitly perceived the purpose of higher education to be threefold, namely: an instrument for meeting the needs of society or making society better; producing graduates who possess the skills required by the labour market; and bolstering graduates' employability. Therefore, it can be argued that how students decipher the purpose of higher education influences their attendant viewpoints of quality.

The second contextual influence on the students' conception of quality as fitness for purpose is the rampant graduate unemployment in Uganda that is attributed to the mismatch between the skills of graduates and needs of the labour market. Therefore, viewing quality in higher education in terms of producing job creators is seen as a strategy for ameliorating unemployment among the graduates of HEIs.

Quality as Excellence

The students identified with the excellence perspective of quality and described it using phrases, such as: "cream of all other universities"; "benchmark university"; "best university"; "yardstick"; "model university"; and "best students and lecturers". These descriptions can be nested into excellence because they are criterion-referenced and relate to input-process- output perspectives of quality. In relation to the input perspective, a Civil Engineering student described a quality university as follows:

> If you look at a university, like let us say in the UK [United Kingdom], a top university is a university that has the best students and lecturers.

Contrary to public perception that the quality of education at Makerere University has plummeted since the early 1990s, a Music and Drama student said:

> I think Makerere [University] acts as the cream of all universities [in Uganda].

Another student from the same programme said:

> Though of late people are complaining about it (Makerere University) that they [sic] no longer deliver [quality education], but I think those are peoples' perceptions. But to us, it is the best [university in Uganda].

Commanding the "best" position not only hinged on the institution in its entirety but was also considered at the level of the constituent units of a university and at the level

of a discipline. For example, the students regarded Makerere University to be a premier institution in technology. This was premised on burgeoning technological innovations at the College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology (CEDAT), such as the design of a Uganda's first electric vehicle (Kiira EV) that runs on rechargeable lithium batteries, in 2011. A Music and Drama student said:

> As far as engineering is concerned, Makerere is considered as the best [University in Uganda]. That is what I may say because recently, you heard of the way they made a car. But have you heard it from any other institution [of higher learning]? If it is there, maybe I have never heard about it.

Innovation at Makerere has been heralded as a manifestation of quality at the university since higher education should contribute to technological innovation.

Quality as excellence was also understood in terms of adequacy of learning resources, such as laboratories, workshops and libraries. Students of hard applied disciples deciphered quality in higher education in terms of a non-elitist dimension of quality. This non-elitist perspective focused on the existence and adequacy of facilities/tools in laboratories and workshops:

> As for me, what I would consider a good university or the qualities of a good university [is] when the university is able to provide whatever the students require; all the requirements of students. For example, the libraries, laboratories-like if a university has MDD (music, dance and drama), the department itself has to be with those [sic] equipment, those instruments. (Final year Music and Drama student)

Therefore, adequacy of learning resources is a measure of quality in higher education. Specifically, the library should have adequate and current books and journals. In higher education, the library is increasingly being regarded as the academic heart of the university. Besides the library, universities should have laboratories with adequate and current equipment. Asked about what the university should do to improve the quality in higher education, a Music and Drama student said:

> Provide facilities such as studios where a person can practice his or her vocal abilities.

Therefore, it can be argued that learning resources facilitate the transformation of students.

Quality as Consistency/Perfection

Unexpectedly, the idea of quality as consistency (zero errors/defects) emerged among the Development Studies students. However, the students perceived quality as consistency solely in terms of the administrative processes of a university, specifically records

management, and not in terms of the outputs of higher education. A Development Studies student said:

> Makerere [University] has the habit of mismanaging students' results and some of them [students] even end up not graduating. But [with] some universities such as UCU [Uganda Christian University], it is very difficult to find such issues that a student has no marks at the end of the programme.

The use of the word "habit" in the above quotation indicates that the problem of losing students' marks is endemic at Makerere University. Another Development Studies student echoed the same concern:

> But it [loss of students' marks] is common within Makerere University.

This finding suggests that viewing quality as consistency is not overly detached from the higher education sector and points to the idea that quality as consistency – manifested in zero defects (or zero errors) or getting things done right the first time – is relevant to the higher education enterprise but only in the domain of administrative processes. Obviously, the challenges or problems that the students face on a programme, or what they regard as significant problems, certainly influence their conceptions of quality. This further suggests that quality is a context-bound phenomenon and the challenges that the students face certainly inform their perception of it.

Discussion

The study findings have demonstrated that unravelling the conception of quality is a challenging task since none of the discipline-specific student groups identified a single definition of quality, which confirms the assertion that quality is a multi-dimensional concept (Campbell and Royzsnyai 2002; Harvey and Green 1993; IUCEA 2008; Sanyal 2013) that is susceptible to multiple perspectives (Newton 2007). This is evidenced by the four perspectives of quality that stemmed from the current study, namely, transformation, fitness for purpose, excellence and consistency. Surprisingly, value for money did not emerge as a definition of quality in higher education by the students though it featured in Jungblut, Vukasovic and Stensaker (2015). Relatedly, fitness of purpose did not feature as a definition of quality. There are three likely reasons for the omission of fitness of purpose from the students' viewpoints of quality in higher education. The first likely reason is that the students were predisposed towards the externally-focused fitness for purpose perspective of quality in higher education which does not justify ascertaining fitness for purpose. Ideally, it is the provider-defined fitness for purpose, which requires an assessment of the mission of a university for fitness of purpose. The provider-defined or mission-based fitness for purpose would require an assessment of the extent to which the purpose itself is relevant or acceptable to the

relevant stakeholders (Sanyal and Martin 2007) and the degree to which the purpose is compliant with the national educational goals (Mhlanga 2008; Parri 2006). Secondly, the respondents could have assumed fitness of purpose to be integral to fitness for purpose.

The other dimension of fitness for purpose that emerged from the study is employability. The employability perspective is anchored in the view that the job placement rate of graduates is a measure of quality. The students' and academics' employability concern is consistent with the requirement by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE 2008, 22) that institutional audits, one of the external quality assurance mechanisms, should focus on, inter alia, "The period it takes graduates of a given [higher education] institution to get full employment after graduation". This aims at checking the quality of graduates and is consistent with Astin's (1980) outcome view of quality. Nonetheless, the framework is silent on the reasonable period for a graduate to be employed after graduation and whether the reference job should be a graduate job. According to Rath (2010), graduate employability allows HEIs to compare their quality of education with requirements of the job market. However, Rath (2010) cautions against over-reliance on graduate employability as a measure of quality since graduate employment can vary depending on prevailing economic conditions; an economic crisis can accelerate graduate unemployment.

The students alluded to consistency as a dimension of quality in higher education and this is consistent with Zachariah (2007) who found out that students in Oman had the strongest support for consistency.

The study further revealed intra-group contestations around variants of notions of quality. For example, while the students concurred on transformation as a notion of quality, competing voices on the skills that higher education should develop were explicitly recognisable. Specifically, the point of departure among the students was on whether higher education should develop basic skills or advanced subject skills. Some students argued that providing basic skills would tantamount to providing skills training instead of higher education in view of the fact that it is higher order skills that make higher education higher. The above contestations among the students and academics reveal that while a stakeholder group may agree on the definition of quality, it may hold divergent views on the notions of that particular definition. Therefore, variants of a notion of quality are multi-dimensional just as quality is. This finding is consistent with Newton (2002; 2007) who argues that quality is an essential contestation and that there are competing voices and discourses.

The extant studies on quality assurance focus on identifying conceptions of quality among the stakeholder groups in higher education in general and HEIs in particular. However, the current study has broken new ground by identifying explicit and implicit rationales behind these notions. The findings have revealed that a stakeholder group's or an individual respondent's conception(s) of quality in higher education do(es) not

take place in a vacuum. Arguably, contestations among the stakeholders, either about the definition of quality in higher education or about a particular variant of a definition and/or its nature are, in part, informed by the deeply rooted perception of the purpose of higher education in general and a university in particular. This finding is consistent with Barnett's (1992, 5) view that "behind what constitutes quality, there lies – explicitly formed or tacitly held – a view as the end that higher education should serve". The findings further demonstrated that there are multiple purposes of higher education. The multiple and yet competing purposes of higher education breed multiple definitions of quality in higher education. Therefore, consensus on the meaning of quality can be hastened by arriving at a common purpose(s) of higher education rather than engaging with the notions of themselves. This suggests that defining the purpose of higher education should serve as a precursor to defining quality in higher education.

The current article contributes to the limited scholarship on students' conception of quality in higher education generally and in the context of a developing country with an embryonic quality assurance system in particular. The findings from a neglected – yet the principal stakeholder in higher education – are important in the quality discourse. Therefore, quality assurance schemes should be responsive to students' conceptions of quality in higher education in addition to the conceptions of other stakeholders, such as lecturers, employers and government.

The study had inherent limitations. Firstly, the study focused on a single public university and the findings therefore cannot be generalised to all universities in Uganda in particular and developing countries in general. Secondly, the study was based on views of final year undergraduate students and therefore does not offer insights into whether the year of study influences students' conceptions of quality in higher education. In view of these limitations, future studies on students' conceptions of quality in higher education should: (a) delve into the perspective of quality in higher education by students in private universities with a view to gaining insights into whether there are similarities in or differences between how quality in higher education is conceptualised across public and private HEIs; and (b) examine whether there are differences between first year and final year undergraduate students' conceptions of quality in higher education.

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