



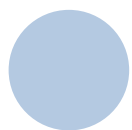
## **UNIVERSITY CHALLENGE:**

Towards a well-being approach to quality in higher education

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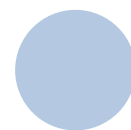
global  
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**nef** (the new economics foundation) is a registered charity founded in 1986 by the leaders of The Other Economic Summit (TOES), which forced issues such as international debt onto the agenda of the G8 summit meetings. It has taken a lead in helping establish new coalitions and organisations such as the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign; the Ethical Trading Initiative; the UK Social Investment Forum; and new ways to measure social and economic well-being.

The year 2007 marked the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), an independent body funded by subscriptions from UK universities and colleges of higher education, and through contracts with the main UK higher education funding bodies. Its mission is to ‘safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education’. Following its anniversary, **nef**’s centre for well-being was asked to outline a bold vision of quality higher education to help challenge and shape the Agency’s work over the next 10 years. This paper presents our thoughts and ideas. Its aim is to look beyond current debates in the sector – regarding funding, widening participation, academic standards and the like – to give explicit consideration to quality from the perspective of the individual learner and with regard to the well-being of the wider economy, environment and society. In doing so, it provides a starting point, rather than a blueprint, for reconfiguring and re-energising the debate about quality in higher education and advocates a shift towards a more transformative approach to quality as we look to the future. We welcome your reflections and contributions.

# Who we are

This discussion paper has been researched and written by the centre for well-being at **nef** (the new economics foundation) on behalf of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

**nef** is an independent think-and-do tank that inspires and demonstrates real economic well-being. Established in 1986, **nef** is a registered charity with a powerful reputation for leading research and influencing public opinion through its innovations. **nef** is responsible for the UK development of social auditing, time banks, community development financial institutions, Jubilee 2000, pioneering personal and social well-being measurement, social return on investment, and community investment tax credits. For over 20 years **nef**'s ideas and advocacy have had far-reaching tangible results, including a crucial role in securing around \$36 billion of debt forgiveness for the world's poorest countries, persuading the Government to invest over £130 million in enterprise development in disadvantaged communities, and helping to found the UK Social Investment Forum (UKSIF), which has supported a £6 billion socially responsible investment (SRI) sector.

The centre for well-being at **nef** aims to enhance individual and collective well-being in ways that are environmentally sustainable and socially just. Set-up in 2006, the centre builds on **nef**'s established well-being programme and significantly expands our work in this area. Our aim is to promote the concept of well-being as a legitimate and useful aim of policy and to provide individuals, communities and organisations with the understanding and tools to redefine wealth in terms of well-being. We believe it is possible to lead long and happy lives without costing the Earth. We advance thinking in this area by undertaking policy-relevant research and consultancy, by measuring well-being and the factors influencing well-being, and by providing the training and tools for others to assess and positively influence well-being. We undertake pioneering work on psychological well-being, capturing how people feel and how they function, as well as working simultaneously on environmental, social, and economic well-being to deal with the conflicts and trade-offs between them.

# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction and overview

The UK higher education system prides itself on its reputation for high quality. But high quality for whom, and for what purpose? This discussion paper explores how existing conceptualisations of quality in higher education are narrow, based on limited stakeholder interests and are fuelling an increasingly instrumental approach to higher education with damaging results. It presents the case for redefining quality to capture higher education's transformative role for individuals and for the wider economy, environment and society.

Over prioritisation of economic interests regarding the role and purpose of higher education is restricting how quality is defined and understood in the higher education sector. By viewing learners simply as future workers, a premium is being placed on the development of specialist and technical knowledge to support growth of the economy and to enhance the competitiveness of individuals within it, to the detriment of the wider knowledge, skills and understanding which higher education could and should provide. The result is that high-quality outcomes are narrowly defined by measures such as non-completion rates, graduate employment rates, and graduate earnings. Similarly, high-quality systems and processes are primarily defined by external stakeholder interests and tend to be understood in terms of meeting minimum standards, ensuring consistency, and demonstrating value for money. Failure to place sufficient value on the wider, non-economic functions of higher education means that they are, in turn, failing to be reflected in definitions and approaches to quality within the sector.

This paper highlights the urgent need to rethink the purpose of higher education to take account of its transformative potential and to redefine quality in higher education accordingly. It calls for a higher education mandate which serves a dual purpose of enhancing both personal and collective well-being, recognising the learner's role as a member of a family, community and society as well as a future worker. In doing so, it acts as a starting point for exploring a new approach to quality in higher education and presents six features of a well-being-led approach to quality to help shape quality assurance and quality enhancement activities in the future.

# The emergence of quality assurance and quality enhancement in higher education

The terms 'quality assurance' and 'quality enhancement' are now firmly embedded within higher education in the UK. These dual activities, which tend to involve assurance procedures to demonstrate rigour and transparency to external stakeholders alongside enhancement initiatives to support continuous improvement in the quality of provision and the quality of the learner experience, are reflected in quality management systems at higher education institutions (HEIs) across the sector.

The reasons oft cited for quality management are to provide accountability to stakeholders, to safeguard standards of higher education qualifications, and to ensure changes in the external environment and management of higher education – such as the increasingly diverse student population, diminishing resources for delivery, and new modes of provision including franchising and flexible learning opportunities – do not diminish overall quality.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>

This growing emphasis on quality in higher education is not altogether surprising. The climate of audit and assessment apparent in today's society, established under the Conservative Government of the 1980s and maintained to the full by Labour Governments under both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, has elevated the role of quality measurement and performance management across a range of sectors, not least that of education.<sup>5</sup> Over the same period, significant changes in relation to higher education have been evident at a policy level (Box 1) and through the more general expansion and globalisation of the higher education sector, albeit that there are distinctions to be drawn between educational structures, qualifications system and funding arrangements within the UK. The result is that developments have increased demand, either directly or indirectly, for effective quality procedures and have served to place a higher priority within higher education institutions on managing issues of quality.



### Box 1. The demand for quality procedures in higher education: some key policy developments.

- The 1991 Government White Paper *Higher Education: A New Framework* and subsequent Further and Higher Education Act 1992 marked the shift from polytechnics to 'new universities' and brought new funding arrangements for higher education via the creation of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (with additional Acts for Scotland and Wales establishing similar bodies in each country).<sup>6</sup>
- In 1997, the Dearing Committee's report *Higher Education in the Learning Society* brought a suite of recommendations in relation to further growth and widening participation of higher education, teaching quality and staff training, funding of higher education, and qualifications and standards. It also presented an overall aim for higher education to be to sustain a learning society and documented four purposes of higher education as part of this aim.
- The 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) introduced a Public Service Agreement target for the then Department for Education and Skills to achieve a 50 per cent participation rate for 18–30-year-olds in England and Wales by 2010 (Scotland has much higher participation rates, already reaching this figure). This target, including progress on fair access, was retained in the 2004 CSR.
- The 2003 *Future of Higher Education* White Paper and 2004 Higher Education Act brought controversial changes to funding arrangements within higher education by enabling higher education institutions in England, from 2006 onwards, to set variable fees for student courses up to a cap of £3000. Other provisions within the Act included setting up the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in England (and equivalent body in Wales) to oversee new plans with regard to student fees and the creation of a new body for dealing with student complaints.<sup>7</sup>
- The recent findings and recommendations of the Treasury commissioned Leitch Review *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy: World Class Skills* bring potentially far-reaching implications for the role of Higher Education Institutions to focus on the development of high level skills and to support the UK's drive to become a world leader in skills by 2020. The final report, published in 2006, advocates a more demand-led system for skills, refers to the need for economically valuable qualifications, and recommends 'a rebalancing of the priorities of HEIs to make available relevant, flexible and responsive provision that meets the high skills needs of employers and their staff'<sup>8</sup>

The result is that a new quality infrastructure has emerged across the UK higher education sector. This is evidenced by individual HEIs who now employ dedicated staff to work on issues of quality and by the establishment of organisations such as the QAA, and more recently the Higher Education Academy, to safeguard academic standards and to assure and enhance quality.<sup>9,10</sup>

A European dimension to quality in higher education is also apparent. This is most notably reflected by the Bologna process which seeks to develop compatible criteria and methods for quality assurance across 29 European countries. It forms one of a number of objectives signed-up to as part of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 to create overall convergence in higher education systems at a European level to 'enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education'.<sup>11</sup>

Quality in higher education clearly matters.

# The inequality of quality in higher education

Despite the growing emphasis now placed on quality, finding a definition or shared understanding of what is meant by quality in higher education remains a challenge.<sup>12,13,14</sup> This has led to a number of researchers exploring the different ways in which the concept is conceived and an attempt to categorise the main interpretations. Harvey and Knight suggest, for example, that quality can be broken down into five dimensions: quality as exceptional (e.g. high standards), quality as consistency (e.g. zero defects), quality as fitness for purpose (fitting customer specifications), quality as value for money, and quality as transformative.<sup>15</sup>

What becomes apparent from these analyses is the role of different stakeholders in prioritising different quality perspectives according to their interests and motivations. Students (current and prospective), staff, government, employers, professional bodies, civil society organisations, and others are likely to differ in their definitions of quality and in their preferences with regard to how quality is measured according to their particular interests. For example, Becket and Brookes suggest that external stakeholders such as employers, prospective students, and professional bodies tend to prioritise the dimensions of quality as consistency, quality as fitness for purpose and quality as value for money whereas stakeholders such as students and frontline staff are more likely to be concerned with quality as transformative, characterised by an ongoing process of empowerment and enhancement.<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to shaping higher education quality systems in practice, the important question is, therefore, whether these different stakeholder interests and different conceptualisations of quality are given equal weight. The answer? It would appear not. In particular, existing higher education quality systems fail to acknowledge the transformative potential of higher education, both for individual learners and for the wider society in which they live. This is not so much a reflection on the work of those involved in quality assurance and enhancement in the UK but instead linked to growing inequality between different stakeholder perspectives with regard to a more fundamental question: 'what is higher education for?'

## What is higher education for?

This question has long been the subject of discourse both within and outside the higher education sector, with debates about the public good versus private good reflecting different stakeholder views on the role and purpose of higher education.<sup>17,18,19,20</sup> Some commentators have added to the debates by adopting a historical perspective to demonstrate how Western society's interpretation of the role of higher

education has shifted over time. Zeldin<sup>21</sup> and Krznaric<sup>22</sup> trace, for example, the movement from generalist thinking and a focus on the acquisition of all realms of knowledge in Ancient Greece and during the Renaissance to a shift in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries to focus on religious knowledge and belief. This, they argue, was followed in the nineteenth century by an emphasis on increasing basic literacy and numeracy to help contribute towards national economic development and 'individual moral improvement'. As we move throughout the twentieth century, they note how specialist knowledge and skills became the primary objective of higher education and upon which notions of effective higher education start to be developed, with this continuing into the twenty-first century alongside a growing emphasis on technological competence. This has led to assertions that where we are today – a focus on technological competence combined with extremely high degrees of specialisation – is too limited.<sup>23</sup>

Recognising the multiplicity of stakeholders who shape perspectives on what higher education is for was a key objective of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in seeking to outline a shared 20-year vision for the sector.<sup>24</sup> In the Committee's report (the Dearing Report) the purpose of higher education is identified as four-fold:

1. To inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well-equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment.
2. To increase knowledge and understanding for its own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society.
3. To serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels.
4. To play a major role in shaping democratic, civilised, inclusive society.

The aspiration, as outlined by Dearing, is that higher education serves a number of purposes, ranging from inspiring personal 'growth', through to supporting economic development and building what is now often termed 'active citizens'. The reality suggests, however, that it is the third purpose – to serve the economy (and arguably individuals' competitiveness within it) – which is now driving the higher education system to the detriment of the others.

For example, some researchers note the changes in language and the increased use of business metaphors in higher education as evidence of this shift<sup>25,26</sup> whilst others point to the rise in the number of vocational courses now being offered by UK HEIs, patterns of expenditure,<sup>27</sup> and the evaluation of research in financial terms,<sup>28</sup> as an indication of higher education being increasingly shaped by economic forces. This prioritisation can be further evidenced by taking a brief glimpse at the machinery of central Government itself. In the UK, the newly created Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills marks what is essentially the establishment of a new Department for the Knowledge Economy. Whilst this in itself may be a strength for addressing Dearing's third purpose of higher education, it leads to one wondering where the Government department(s) is which is supporting the wider role of universities and optimising its contribution to the future society, not just the future economy.

Some authors claim that the nature and extent of the shift towards economic interests has led to a marketisation of the sector, and point to the recent move to introduce variable tuition fees in some parts of the UK as an example of this.<sup>29</sup> Alongside changing the nature of the higher education 'offer', it is also argued that the individual learner is being increasingly conditioned to become part of the same market driven system:

*'This commercialisation of higher education serves a bigger purpose, though. It softens students up for the rigours of globalisation. By creating a market, young people are encouraged to think and behave like rational economic man. They become "human capital", calculating the rate of return on their university investment. A degree becomes a share certificate. Commercialisation conditions students to expect no help from others, or society, and therefore never to provide help in return. Debt and economic conditioning discourages graduates from going into lower-paid caring jobs - and instead into the City, where the real "value" is. It fashions a Britain that competes rather than cares.'*<sup>30</sup>

Figures released from the new body which deals with student complaints similarly suggest increasing consumer-like behaviour among students.<sup>31</sup>

## **Bringing higher education, and quality, back on an equal track**

These trends and observations are not presented without recognising the important economic role of higher education in the UK. The sector makes a significant contribution to the wealth of the nation,<sup>32</sup> and is a substantial force in many regional and local economies, as a source of income and employment (albeit in many cases this could be enhanced further).<sup>33,34</sup> Similarly, the potential private gain to be derived from greater financial security and more rewarding and fulfilling work in a chosen field following attainment of a higher education qualification, is not in itself being questioned.<sup>35</sup>

It is the over-dominance of economic interests which is damaging, fuelling an increasingly instrumental approach to higher education and crowding out the space for HEIs to fulfil other vital purposes for individuals and for the economy, the environment and society at large. Failing to place sufficient value on these additional dimensions of higher education – which are about learning not simply educating – means that they are in turn failing to be identified and measured as integral components of higher education quality. The result is an urgent need to rethink the purpose of higher education to take account of its transformative potential and to redefine quality in higher education accordingly.

# Towards a well-being approach to quality in higher education

The evidence base on which we are now able to draw about how people experience their lives and the interdependence of people and the planet presents a clear mandate for the transformative role of higher education in the future. This mandate necessitates higher education serving a dual purpose. First, to develop knowledge and understanding to enhance ‘the self’, both during and following an individual’s involvement in the formal learning process. Secondly, to simultaneously stimulate individuals’ appreciation of, and connection to, the world around them. In short, it requires embedding notions of both personal and collective well-being at the heart of higher education.

## Higher education and personal well-being

In relation to higher education and personal well-being, a much more holistic approach is required. The importance placed on the economic benefits of higher education, both for and by individual learners, must be matched by consideration of a much wider range of factors essential for human flourishing. This means re-imagining higher education to take account of those factors which are known determinants of people’s well-being but which are perhaps less related to people’s stated preferences or experiences. It also requires challenging an instrumental approach to higher education which defines the well-being enhancing role of higher education solely in terms of increasing an individual’s economic potential by providing the knowledge and skills for more effective competition in the market place.

We now have compelling evidence to demonstrate the importance of making this shift. First, a significant body of research shows that economic growth, whether measured by an increase in GDP at a national level or at the level of the individual by growth in income, does not lead to ever increasing gains in personal well-being. Whilst a correlation does exist between individual income and well-being within countries, this relationship is weak and begins to break down significantly above a certain point (which is usually rather lower than most people expect).<sup>36</sup> Indeed, it has recently been argued that in most Western countries the relationship is roughly logarithmic – in other words, at any given level of income a 20 per cent increase gives rise to only a 2 per cent increase in subjective life satisfaction.<sup>37</sup>

Alongside this, pioneering research from the field of positive psychology has shown the significance of other, non-economic factors affecting people’s experience of their lives. This research has enabled a more sophisticated understanding to be developed of the way in which people’s feelings and functioning are mutually re-enforcing. Recent

evidence has emerged that the authentic experience of positive emotions (such as enjoyment, enthusiasm and interest) enables people to broaden their thought-action repertoires, by being more flexible, seeking out more opportunities and becoming more creative. In addition to their immediate benefits positive experiences help build enduring physical, intellectual and psychological resources (commonly called the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions).<sup>38</sup> Researchers have highlighted the importance of building relationships with others, encouraging autonomy and reciprocity, supporting people to demonstrate their competences across different domains of life<sup>39</sup> as well as devising strategies that enable people to commit to longer term goals.<sup>40</sup>

## Higher education and collective well-being

To be effective in fulfilling a transformative role, higher education cannot afford to focus solely on individual needs and gains. The problems we now face at both a local and global scale puts higher education firmly in the driving seat to equip its learners with the knowledge, skills and understanding to pioneer innovative and creative responses to achieving wider economic, social and environmental well-being.

Achieving quality in higher education must therefore be characterised by a higher education system committed to playing its part in the achievement of collective outcomes, moving beyond narrow conceptualisations of the role and purpose of higher education based on an individual- or institution-focused return on investment. Instead, it has a role in advancing our collective well-being by better enabling people to understand the links between their own lives and those of others, by developing the attributes and values which enable people to work together to bring about change, and by inspiring people to work towards achieving a more just and sustainable world in which power and resources are shared more equitably.

## Developing a new vision for quality higher education

Aspiring to higher education playing a dual role by bringing benefits to the individual alongside enhancing a sense of collective well-being need not be incongruous. In fact, they offer complementary pathways and an opportunity to demonstrate the full power and potential of higher education for the individual, for the economy, for the environment and for society. The challenge for higher education institutions is to address the dimensions of personal and collective well-being simultaneously, through both what they do and the way in which they do it.

A transformative, well-being approach to quality in higher education therefore necessitates consideration of both ‘the what’ and ‘the how’. This encompasses what Pirsig referred to as the static and the dynamic dimensions of quality.<sup>41</sup> Questions about how knowledge is created and applied, how a community (in this case of learners) can best draw inspiration and support from each other, and how people are rewarded therefore become important dimensions of quality alongside the content of what is taught and learnt.

To explore these aspects in more detail, we first turn to consider higher education’s role in developing the knowledge-based, static dimensions of quality (‘the what’) necessary for enhancing personal and collective well-being, asking ‘what is worth knowing?’.

# What is worth knowing?

To begin to answer this question it is first important to conceptualise student identity beyond that of 'future worker'. This is important for ensuring higher education provides its learners with an education that goes beyond an instrumental view of it.<sup>42</sup> We must also recognise the learner's role as a member of a family, community and society and support the requirements for effective functioning in these roles as well as for the individual. This means shifting the balance from an over-emphasis on the economic, commercial and technical endeavours of what is taught and learnt to also consider what is worth knowing in terms of personal and human development. As Nussbaum states, higher education institutions are 'producing citizens and this means we must ask what a good citizen of the present day should know'.<sup>43</sup>

Although detailed curriculum matters fall beyond the remit of agencies such as QAA, the way in which quality is conceptualised and operationalised through quality assurance systems and quality enhancement mechanisms may have surprising potential to affect both the content and nature of the learning experience (by encouraging institutions to respond to those issues they are most frequently reviewed against or asked questions about).

To begin to think about the 'what' of higher education we outline below seven things every graduate should know if higher education is to be effective in fulfilling a transformative role for individuals and for the world around them. In essence, it presents a vision for a knowledge-based 'graduateness' and should have applicability across all disciplines, courses and institutions regardless of the diversity which currently exists within the sector.

## Seven things every graduate should know

### 1. *In-depth knowledge of a favourite subject*

Advanced knowledge and understanding of a favourite subject is the first thing worth knowing from higher education. Learning (at any level) can bring valuable intrinsic rewards to individuals, stimulating the mind and ensuring enjoyment from what education has to offer, as well as helping to advance understanding in specialist fields of teaching and research. Here, things are worth knowing 'for their own sake' and for the benefits conveyed to the individual through stimulating their interest and curiosity. In fact, research in positive psychology suggests that engagement, through being absorbed in an activity which is rewarding for its own sake, is an absolutely critical determinant of how much you are likely to value an experience. This has been explored in detail by US psychologist Csikszentmihalyi who refers to the concept of *flow* to describe the distinctive feeling of deep, effortless concentration, total immersion in the task and a distorted sense of time among people who

find experiences enjoyable and fulfilling in themselves – in that they are intrinsically rewarding.<sup>44</sup>

## *2. How to apply knowledge*

Understanding how to make sense of and make use of the knowledge gained from higher education is the second thing worth knowing. There is a high degree of consensus that in western democracies such as Britain, we now have a knowledge based economy which depends on a high degree of specialist knowledge and skill. But, this alone is not enough. Higher education must also teach its students about the principles and techniques for applying knowledge in different contexts, whether this is relation to an economic activity or more broadly about how we address challenges in everyday life. As Handy states, higher education should ‘help you work out what knowledge you need, and how to apply it to solve problems’.<sup>45</sup>

## *3. What makes a good life*

Knowledge about those factors that support human flourishing and happiness is the third thing worth knowing from higher education<sup>46</sup>. Definitions of a ‘good life’ will naturally vary between individuals and cultures but encouraging higher education, and HEIs, to develop learners’ knowledge and understanding of what really matters when it comes to their well-being is a role which should be encouraged. To enable them to deepen knowledge about the self, students should learn about the limited gains in well-being which result from pursuing extrinsic, status-laden goals in contrast to the more enduring satisfaction that comes from activities that people find personally meaningful<sup>47</sup>. They should also be encouraged to learn about the non-economic factors which have a much greater affect on the quality of people’s experience of their lives, including the interpersonal dimensions of well-being such as their relationships with others and the communities in which they live.

## *4. How others think*

Knowledge which enhances an understanding of difference and how others think is the fourth thing worth knowing from higher education. As Zeldin notes, even if higher education achieves what it claims to do by teaching learners ‘how to think’, it does not necessarily teach students ‘how others think’.<sup>48</sup> Whilst one cannot expect higher education to explore how others think in a literal sense, it should do more to develop students’ knowledge about the underlying assumptions and approaches of different academic disciplines and about the routes available to find out how others think. It should also build students capabilities to reflect on how their own ways of thinking are based on certain values which are affected by, and impact upon, others and the world around them.



## 5. How change happens

Knowledge and understanding about how change happens is the fifth thing worth knowing from higher education. Graduates of higher education have huge potential as change agents in society but this potential will be restricted if people do not learn about how change happens. Failing to develop knowledge in this area will also restrict students' own understanding of how to make sense of the world around them and to understand its complexity. Recent research by Krzanic suggests that whilst many fields of academic inquiry already include a 'change' component in relation to their discipline, there is scope to bring these different ways of thinking about change together and a need for 'broader thinking about how change does happen so that we can be more creative and adept at devising strategies to confront the enormous challenges facing our societies and planet'.<sup>49</sup>

## 6. The dynamics of power and influence

Knowledge about the dynamics of power and influence is the sixth thing worth knowing from higher education. If learners are to be equipped to bring about change in their own lives, as well as in the lives of others, learning about power and influence must be a key feature of higher education. Knowledge such as how power and influence is defined, the distribution of power and influence, and the impact of inequalities in power and influence between individuals and institutions are all things worth knowing. This should include consideration across a range of areas such as the distribution of wealth and assets, control over the economy, political power, the role of the media, the influence of civil society organisations, and the impact of international factors, such as the EU and the World Bank.

## 7. Global interdependence

Knowledge about our global interdependence is the seventh thing worth knowing from higher education.<sup>50</sup> Higher education should play a role in teaching students about the threats, challenges and opportunities facing people and the planet, both now and in the future: 'the development of a global perspective and an adoption of an approach to develop global citizens who understand the need for sustainable development should be vital for all higher education curricula irrespective of subject area'.<sup>51,52</sup> Within this, emphasising the interdependence of people and planet and the need for a systems-based approach to achieving sustainable and equitable futures is vital. As the longevity of ideas for addressing global problems gets shorter and new challenges continue to emerge, graduates need to be increasingly adaptive to the unforeseen challenges which lie ahead. Issues such as climate change, world population increase, and growing economic and social inequalities are issues all graduates should know about and, if they are to be successfully addressed, will require an understanding of systems based approaches alongside specialist disciplinary knowledge. Such knowledge relating to our global interdependence is also vital for the advancement of ethical responsible citizenship with Walker and Nixon referring to the need for higher education to create a 'thick morality', grounded in the notions of common good as the ethical basis for policy and practice, as compared to a 'thin morality' based on competitive individualism and hierarchical divisions.<sup>53</sup>

# Co-producing quality in higher education

Whilst the transformative potential of higher education can be advanced through the acquisition of new knowledge and awareness – as outlined by the ‘seven things every graduate should know’ - it is also the *process* of learning which is important. Alongside developing a well-being approach to quality in higher education by asking what is worth knowing, higher education must therefore also address the dynamic aspects of Pirsig’s classification which focuses on the subjective, intuitive, and action-based dimensions of quality.

The issue, however, is more than about the merits of different teaching styles for achieving educational outcomes. It also reaches beyond current, albeit valid, aspects of quality enhancement which are concerned with the support resources available to students to enhance their learning. Rather, the possibility for students to engage in a higher education system which, by the nature of its design, fosters attributes such as creativity, curiosity, critical inquiry, reciprocity and empathy is where quality in ‘the how’ of higher education really begins to show zeal. A place where students are provided with the opportunities and inspiration to actively shape their learning and where what is learnt through the practice of ‘doing’ higher education, not only the knowledge it imparts, supports a society in which personal and collective well-being can be enhanced.

## Engaging the learner

The relevance of the dynamic, experiential aspects of higher education is reflected at its most basic level in the root of the word ‘educate’ which means ‘the experience that brings out’. This suggests, albeit implicitly, that education is not something which can simply be delivered but which requires a degree of agency on the part of the learner. Whilst this dimension which recognises students as active contributors to the process of learning and to the outcomes of higher education is not new, it is only more recently that we have begun to understand the significance of fostering a sense of agency and autonomy for people’s well-being, and in turn noted the benefits it can have for individuals’ education and learning experiences.

Research by Deci and Ryan highlights, for example, the importance of students experiencing autonomy as part of the learning process so that they feel supported to explore, take initiative and to develop and implement solutions to problems.<sup>54</sup> Alongside autonomy, Deci and Ryan also suggest that the nature of people’s social contexts (for example, higher education) should be designed to address people’s need to build their competence and relationships. It is when these three psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness are

satisfied, according to Deci and Ryan's Self Determination Theory, that higher quality experiences and higher quality learning flourishes.

## Co-producing for quality

Achieving a higher education system which satisfies these needs and is characterised by a more transformative, well-being approach to the learning process requires a new way of working. One approach which offers an opportunity for this new way of working is a co-production model.

The term 'co-production' began as a way of describing the critical role that service 'consumers' have in enabling professionals to make a success of their jobs. It was originally coined in the 1970s by Elinor Ostrom<sup>55</sup> and others to explain why neighbourhood crime rates went up in Chicago when police stopped walking the beat and lost connection with local community members. It was used also in the UK in the 1980s by Anna Coote and others at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and the King's Fund to describe the reciprocal relationship between professionals and individuals necessary to effect change.<sup>56</sup> The concept has also been expanded by US civil rights lawyer, Edgar Cahn, who has urged that the credibility of co-production depends on four values: assets, redefining work, reciprocity and social networks.<sup>57</sup>

By introducing a co-production approach into higher education, the relationship between 'expert' (staff) and 'user' (student) is reconfigured. In this context, learners are recognised as assets within the higher education system, not simply a future worker to be employed or an output towards meeting a Government target. This does not detract from the specialist knowledge or professional skills held by staff members but recognises that the quality of the learning experience for the student is likely to be greatly enhanced through feeling a sense of agency and by an ongoing process of collaboration and exchange. Whilst some students and staff may appear to favour a 'transaction' approach to higher education, a model of co-production which provides learners with the opportunity to co-produce the curriculum and wider aspects of their learning experience has the potential to bring benefits to learners and institutions alike (Box 2).

## Box 2. Co-production and higher education

Research by nef<sup>58</sup> highlights the powerful ways in which co-production can alter traditional roles between ‘experts’ and ‘providers’ of services to create partnership models that proactively engage with ‘users’ and ‘communities’. It demonstrates how co-production approaches bring benefits to professionals, to individuals and to the wider social networks in which they exist.

Drawing on nef’s previous co-production work (for example, health and social care, youth justice) it is possible to speculate how co-production approaches could similarly take shape within higher education.

- Involvement in decisions about their education, as well as experience in self-managing, could significantly increase learners’ satisfaction with their experience of interacting with the higher education system.
- Learner involvement could lead to reduced student anxiety and greater understanding of their learning needs.
- The involvement of learners could increase staff satisfaction with their role due to an improvement in the relationship between them following greater student involvement in decision-making and self-management.
- Improved educational outcomes at the individual level result from learners’ involvement in decision-making and in self-management.

An important dimension of quality in ‘the how’ of higher education would therefore be reflected by staff and institutions who act as facilitators and enablers, rather than providers and deliverers: by staff and institutions who work alongside their learners to mainstream reciprocity, help create supportive social networks, and who embed ways of learning which inspire creativity and connect people – all qualities known to enhance people’s lived experience and psychological well-being. But an effective co-production approach to higher education should also recognise the broader social context in which learning takes place, with learning taking place beyond institutional walls; the potential for reciprocal networks to be established between learners and the communities which surround universities for example, or for greater transaction between peers in both physical and virtual learning environments.

### The role of co-production in enhancing collective well-being

By reconfiguring the way in which learning takes place in higher education through a co-production approach, the evidence suggests substantial gains in well-being will accrue to the individual learner over the duration of the learning experience. The question as to whether a co-production approach brings longer term and more wide-ranging benefits is one that we can be less sure about and which is worthy of further research as co-production approaches continue to be taken forward at a practical level.

It is hypothesised, however, that gains in collective well-being are likely. In particular, by changing the way in which learners learn there is potential to radically alter the way in which they later define knowledge (assets) and how they apply co-production values in practice. This different way of thinking, which begins on campus or through the virtual learning network and which is inspired through learners’ direct experience of co-production, could have far reaching implications. For example, in relation to:

- business – transforming the relationship between employer and employee;
- public services – by redefining the relationship between service provider and service user; and
- civil society – by re-energising the relationship between citizen and state.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, it can be hypothesised that transforming ‘the how’ of higher education has a huge role to play in empowering individuals to see their role as shapers of the society in which they live by providing a taste of how they can help co-create the system and enabling them to recognise their role in influencing its outcomes and impacts. In a future which is increasingly uncertain, approaches such as co-production which immerse students in experiences where they are encouraged to connect with difference and where they are tasked with finding collaborative solutions to new challenges would appear integral to enabling this to happen.

In summary, the art of learning can play a crucial role in supporting learners in the art of living. Whilst we can teach people about the issues that affect our personal and collective well-being, knowledge alone is not enough. People need to observe, to feel, and to experience a different way of ‘being’ if we are to challenge both how they think and what they do. Co-production provides an opportunity for higher education to play its role in achieving this. Re-imagining higher education to take account of both what is worth knowing and how learning can best take place to enhance personal and collective well-being should therefore underpin a new, transformative approach to quality in higher education.

# Well-being quality marks for higher education

What might a transformative, well-being approach to quality in higher education look like in practice? Below we outline a number of features – or quality marks – which, if achieved, we believe would begin to capture the transformative, well-being dimensions of quality in higher education.

Importantly, these quality marks have two key characteristics. First, they are universal. As such they should cut across all forms of learning provision and have continued resonance despite the external influences which will inevitably continue to affect the higher education sector over forthcoming years.<sup>60</sup> Secondly, they are outcome focused, outlining the fundamental qualities which higher education should aspire to without being prescriptive about the precise way of getting there, thus safeguarding the autonomy of institutions alongside diversity and innovation in the sector.

The well-being quality marks suggest that high quality higher education (for individuals, for economy, for environment and for society) is achieved when:

- graduates develop knowledge for living alongside knowledge for working;
- intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for learning are set and met;
- the higher education experience is enjoyable and fulfilling;
- the dual qualities of autonomy and reciprocity are enhanced;
- a sense of connection and relatedness is fostered; and
- learners are empowered to be the change (and to be adaptive to change which lies beyond their control).



where HE provides learners with knowledge for living, enabling them to play a transformative role in their own lives and for those around them

#### *Why this should be a mark of quality in higher education:*

The well-being of individuals and the wider economy, environment and society will be affected by what graduates know and the way in which they use this knowledge to affect change in their own, and others', lives. This quality mark therefore recognises the importance of recognising learners beyond their role as future worker, also developing knowledge for sustainable and equitable living. Reaching this quality mark would be evidenced by learners having an understanding of the seven things worth knowing from higher education: in-depth knowledge of a favourite subject; how to apply knowledge; what makes a good life; how others think; how change happens; the dynamics of power and influence; and global interdependence.

#### *Possible ways HEIs could support this quality mark being achieved*

- Introducing a foundation year in human awareness.<sup>61</sup>
- Holding campus conferences on knowledge for living.

#### *How this quality mark might be measured*

- Objective measures:
  - Number of HEIs offering foundation year courses or campus conferences on knowledge for living
  - Number of students enrolling/attending courses or conferences.
  - Increased knowledge across the seven areas worth knowing (through some form of assessment)
- Subjective measures:
  - Learners report increased understanding across the seven areas of what is worth knowing



## Goal achievement

where quality HE encourages and enables learners to fulfil their intrinsic motivations for learning, and supports both intrinsic and extrinsic goal achievement

### *Why this should be a mark of quality in higher education*

Goal setting and achievement is an important component of personal well-being. Setting and achieving goals helps create a feeling of purpose and a sense of being engaged in life, enables people to demonstrate their competences, and creates a sense that good things will happen in the future.<sup>62,63</sup> To be awarded this quality mark, evidence must be available to demonstrate higher education is fostering learners' intrinsic motivations (because the learning itself is enjoyable) alongside the achievement of intrinsic and extrinsic goals (for example, attaining a qualification, gaining employment). Evidence of quality would also be apparent through learners' increased awareness of the importance of pursuing intrinsic motivations, goals and rewards in life (being 'self-determined') and the negative well-being impacts of extrinsically motivated behaviour guided by the pursuit of outcomes that are separable from the activity itself. This quality mark may also be important for advancing our collective well-being. For example, research shows how pursuing extrinsic goals are associated with more ecologically-degrading attitudes and behaviours in that people have less concern for other living things and engage in less environmentally sustainable behaviour.<sup>64</sup>

### *Possible ways HEIs could support this quality mark being achieved*

- By building commitment devices into the system (for example, breaking down the commitment into bite-sized pieces to help learners achieve goals in the medium to long term).
- Teaching motivational theory and providing opportunities for learning for its own sake (for example, to not always lead to an assignment or exam).

### *How this quality mark might be measured*

- Objective measures (many existing):
  - Retention/fall-out rates
  - Qualifications attained
  - Evidence of commitment devices
- Subjective measures:
  - Learners feel a sense of accomplishment from their learning
  - Learners report 'flow' states from their learning experience
  - Learners feel able to demonstrate their competences
  - Learners feel that what they are doing/learning is valuable and worthwhile for its own sake





Enjoyable  
& fulfilling

where HE brings enjoyment and fulfilment (meaning) to the learner both during and beyond the lifetime of the formal learning experience

#### *Why this should be a mark of quality in higher education*

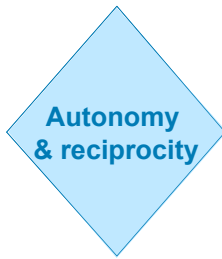
This quality mark recognises that the learning experience, if it is to be well-being supportive, should be enjoyable and fulfilling for the learner. As well as being a valid aim of higher education in its own right, the relevance of enhancing these aspects of well-being in a learning context is demonstrated by the work of Fredrickson who suggests that positive feelings actually lead to good functioning.<sup>65</sup> In other words feeling satisfied or happy is not just an outcome or reward for a positive experience, it also increases our potential for doing well in the future. Fredrickson calls this the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, as it broadens our potential responses to challenging situations and builds our capabilities. Benefits to individual learners may also be combined with gains to institutions through the achievement of this quality mark (one of the key factors affecting drop-out rates among first year students is how stimulating they feel their teaching to be<sup>66</sup>). This quality mark would therefore be awarded by evidence that students had enjoyed their learning and found higher education to be an enriching, inspirational and fulfilling experience (ideally both during and beyond the formal learning timeframe).

#### *Possible ways HEIs could support this quality mark being achieved*

- Holding fairs for living, not just careers fairs.

#### *How this quality mark might be measured:*

- Objective measures:
  - Retention/fall-out rates
- Subjective measures:
  - Learners' satisfaction with their overall learning experience
  - Learners feel that higher education has given them an opportunity to do something they enjoy
  - Learners feel that the experience of higher education is meaningful and fulfilling



## Autonomy & reciprocity

where HE is a reciprocal process with learning co-produced between learners and HEIs and where learners are enabled to become active agents in shaping their future

### *Why this should be a mark of quality in higher education*

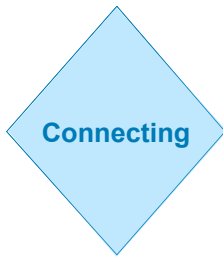
There is strong research evidence to suggest that a sense of agency, autonomy and mastery are key to people's sense of well-being.<sup>67,68,69</sup> Rather than symbolising independence or individualism, autonomy is indicative of 'rule by the self' and would be reflected by learners' willingness to play an active role with regard to a particular activity (for example, by negotiating their learning goals and topics and the style and frequency of their exchanges rather than simply passively absorbing knowledge). Meanwhile reciprocity (the relationship between what one gives and receives) has also been found to bring gains for individuals' well-being and has been strongly linked to health and productive activities.<sup>70,71,72,73</sup> Reciprocity is a separate but interdependent construct which would be characterised by learners, staff, and local communities helping each other in a process of exchange to achieve goals and outcomes relevant for them. The dual characteristics of autonomy and reciprocity are included as a quality mark because of their mutual well-being benefits for all those who would be involved in the exchange 'network'. They are also designated a quality mark due to the role they play in helping to build trust and encouraging people to recognise others as assets which are essential qualities for achieving broader social well-being and stimulating a caring and sharing economy.<sup>74</sup>

### *Possible ways HEIs could support this quality mark being achieved*

- By developing a co-production approach to higher education, where the HEI works to the four core co-production values. An example of a co-production approach could include setting-up a university timebank or establishing a new compact for decision making between learner and institution.
- By introducing more team working, peer support and peer-centred feedback systems, less expert-led (for example, action learning approach).

### *How this quality mark might be measured*

- Objective measures:
  - Increased evidence of peer support and peer-centred learning systems
  - Numbers of timebank members
  - Co-production audit (pilot audit methodology recently developed by Edgar Khan)
- Subjective measures:
  - Extent to which learners feel they help one another
  - Perceptions of/frequency with which learners have actively provided help to other learners
  - Perceptions of/frequency with which learners have received help from other learners
  - Learners' sense of altruism (whether if they help someone they expect help in return)



where HE connects people and fosters relationships which bring people together to see the world from the perspective of others

*Why this should be a mark of quality in higher education:*

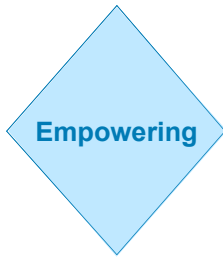
Relatedness refers to the feeling of connection and a sense of belongingness within a community. It has applicability to higher education in relation to fostering a 'community of learners' who feel a sense of connection and relationship to each other. Relatedness can be seen as a mark of quality in higher education by the positive benefits it brings to the individual and to the wider economy, environment and society. For individuals, extensive research shows that the quality of interactions with others influences all aspects of health and functioning<sup>75,76</sup> and covers issues such as social isolation, belongingness, and respectful and fair treatment. These are all aspects likely to affect the quality of the student learning experience and in some cases, the learning outcomes. More specifically, volunteering has been found to have a positive influence through a range benefits such as increasing a sense of purpose and achievement, improving confidence, stimulating interest in new things, and developing skills and competencies.<sup>77,78,79</sup> For collective well-being, this quality mark is important for its potential to develop a sense of empathy, cohesion, and understanding of difference which learners can carry forward into their future lives and which are vital for addressing social, economic and environmental injustices.

*Possible ways HEIs could support this quality mark being achieved*

- Initiatives which foster meaningful connections between an increasingly diverse and international student profile, highlighting the benefits of cross-cultural perspectives and learning.
- Cross-faculty think-tanks which connect people with different disciplinary perspectives.
- Volunteering opportunities linked to course curriculum.

*How this quality mark might be measured:*

- Objective measures (many existing):
  - Number of volunteering opportunities/student and staff volunteers
- Subjective measures:
  - Learners feel a sense of belonging to community of learners/wider community
  - Learners feel they have positive social interaction with others



where HE empowers learners to 'be the change' and builds capacities to enable learners to adapt to change on an ongoing basis

#### *Why this should be a mark of quality in higher education*

This quality mark relates to higher education's role in empowering individuals to transform themselves and the world around them. A key component of this quality mark is fostering the three C's: curiosity, creativity and challenge. These aspects are vital for engaging learners and for stimulating an ongoing sense of sense of curiosity and willingness to learn new things and to do new things.<sup>80</sup> Empowering learners to develop their role in affecting change in their own lives, and those of others, is a key feature of this quality mark. It is about empowering individuals to change themselves alongside 'releasing the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the world'.<sup>81</sup> Intellectual growth is therefore combined with personal growth, and with an enhanced sense of collectivism for improving economic, social and environmental well-being.

#### *Possible ways HEIs could support this quality mark being achieved*

- Inviting students to sign a Declaration of Action for Good on completing their learning
- Introducing 'Be the Change' courses, workshops and activities across all disciplines

#### *How this quality mark might be measured:*

- Objective measures:
  - Evidence of be the change activities/courses
  - Number of student signatories on Declaration
- Subjective measures:
  - Learners feel/have felt inspired to do or try something new
  - Learners report an increased understanding of their own lives (human flourishing) and others (global perspectives) following their engagement in higher education
  - Learners report enhanced ecological feelings/functionings

# Quality times ahead?

As the QAA moves into its next decade, it is time to reclaim how quality is defined and measured in higher education. This means moving towards a definition of quality as transformative in that it enhances the well-being of the individual learner and underpins their potential for enhancing the broader well-being of the economy, environment and society through both what is learnt and the way in which this learning takes place. As recently stated:

*'Our quality assurance and enhancement systems are a means to an end. This end is not a review by the quality assurance agency, it is not the successful completion of programme re-validation, it is not even that students in large numbers get 2:1 degrees. The end that these systems should be promoting is a situation whereby students engage in life changing learning. The second principle is student engagement in learning: in order to experience life-changing learning, students must by definition be engaged with enthusiasm, motivation and passion for their learning.'*<sup>82</sup>

To achieve this requires challenging the balance between different stakeholder interests embodied in existing approaches to quality in higher education. It means redefining the increasingly narrow conceptualisation of learner as future worker, to be 'put through' the higher education system at minimum cost, greatest speed, and with an output (qualification) simply to guarantee competitive advantage in the market.

Professionals and agencies concerned with quality assurance and quality enhancement in higher education have a huge role to play in influencing the nature of the quality times ahead. The well-being quality marks provide a basis for exploring how quality procedures in higher education could begin to encompass more dynamic, transformative and well-being dimensions. However, this paper merely introduces the debate. There is undoubtedly further thinking to be done in relation to each of these quality marks to explore their utility, to refine their focus and to outline how they might translate into measures of quality (and become embedded within quality systems and procedures) at an operational level. Given the diversity of institutions, missions and student populations there is similarly a need for further dialogue *within* the sector to explore the extent to which uniformity in relation to quality is either desirable or feasible.

It is a worthwhile reminder that what gets measured, matters and that institutions and individuals move in the direction of what we most frequently ask questions about. To achieve real quality in higher education, it is time to start asking some new questions.

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- Redefining work*: work must be redefined to include whatever it takes to rear healthy children, preserve families, make neighbourhoods safe and vibrant, care for the frail and vulnerable, redress injustice and make democracy work.
- Reciprocity*: the impulse to give back is universal. Wherever possible, we must replace one-way acts of largesse in whatever form with two-way transactions between individuals, as well as between people and institutions.
- Social networks*: humans require a social infrastructure as essential as roads or bridges. Social networks require ongoing investments of social capital generated by trust, reciprocity and civic engagement.
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# About Measuring What Matters at nef



## Centre for Future Economy

**Measuring what Matters** is an innovative programme of research to value what matters most to people, communities, the environment and local economies, and to ensure that these inform policy. The research uses social return on investment (SROI) to determine the full costs and benefits of government decisions in three areas: women and criminal justice, economic development and children in care.

**Measuring what Matters** starts from premise that we have a tendency to measure the wrong things and therefore to pursue the wrong priorities. Immediate financial savings often drive policy decisions, meaning that hidden costs and benefits are not taken into consideration. Measuring what really matters means shifting the focus to how we as a society can pursue real economic, social and environmental well-being.

Through the use of SROI, **Measuring What Matters** advocates a long-term, transparent approach to measurement which takes a holistic view of impacts and effects. Capturing and valuing what matters most is crucial to ensuring maximum public benefit from public spending. The reports are being published throughout 2008 and are available to download on the **nef** website.

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