

The Problem of Quality

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Defining “quality”, in the education abroad context sometimes resembles how Justice Potter Stewart defined pornography, “I’ll know it when I see it”. I think in this era of heightened educational competition and with the drive toward assessment and outcomes-based learning, we need to do better than that.

Which means of course, that we need to know what we’re talking about when we use the word “quality”. Quality programming needs to be defined; and defined in such a way to make it measurable. And I say that as though it’s something particularly profound and new—it’s absolutely not. Everyone of us knows that that’s what we need—the fact that we haven’t cracked that one yet, is, I think, one of the “problems” with quality that we alluded to in the session title.

In my few minutes here I want to build from some of the points that Mike and Jaume have introduced, by considering the topic of what do we mean when we speak of a “quality program”, and more importantly, how are we going about learning whether we have quality or not. How are we measuring it?

I’d like to start by taking a look at the 2009 FORUM State of the Field survey, which I’m sure a number of you are quite familiar with. The first set of data indicates where academic quality falls as a priority or concern against many others. Based on these results, we’re all much more concerned about program costs than we are academic quality—and given the economic climate that we continue to work within, I think that’s a fairly unsurprising result. But, it does reveal that perhaps we are more concerned with some of the subsidiary issues and are not giving academic quality the central role it perhaps deserves.

I don’t want to suggest that the other concerns listed here, are not associated with overall program quality, because they certainly are, but again as Mike has framed this, are we giving sufficient consideration to the core. Program cost is certainly important in terms of access and value for students, but cost does not really speak to whether a particular program is one of quality.

These next data points also come from the FORUM State of the Field Survey. And I think all of these items speak to the point that even if we know what quality is, we’re not really doing a very good job measuring ourselves in relation to our standards. Many of

us do not have formal and regular qualitative processes in place to evaluate the programs—and what we do have tends to rely heavily on student evaluations—a point that I'll come back to a bit later.

The most problematic data point in that listing for me was that 59% of institutions do not have clearly defined learning objectives for each of their study abroad programs. This means that we're not articulating how our overseas programs directly link to the academic plan and mission of our institutions. It's very difficult to assess quality—or anything else for that matter—when you do not have clearly defined objectives. We at Arcadia are not immune from this particular challenge—and we are currently going through the exercise of developing written, measurable learning outcomes for each of our programs.

If we accept the idea that learning and discovery—both in the classroom and outside of it—are at the core of our work. That in fact the goals of education abroad relate back to enhanced learning, then how are we doing? How do we know when we have quality? How are we tackling and measuring the issues of classroom learning, and how are we approaching issues of out of classroom learning and discovery, whether they be through intentional co-curricular programming, experiential-types of learning, or simply through program structures that are intended to produce a particular outcome. We're getting better articulating some of these connections, and how they in fact relate to quality but I don't think we've solved the issue of measurability yet. So, I'd like to take a few moments to explore the very aspects of programming, how we're measuring various things, and whether any of this relates back to our big question about determining quality.

How do we measure academic quality? We have a mix of program models at Arcadia, including a number of university partners where our students directly enroll, we have a number of Center-based programs where we have direct control of the curriculum, and then we have various faculty-led or embedded courses that go overseas for less than a full semester. For the Arcadia-taught courses both in our centers, as well as those connected to our Glenside campus, we're using the SIR II as the primary method to evaluate the student experience in the classroom. For those of you familiar with the SIR II, it's a fairly popular, standardized evaluative instrument, but it does not to any extent, capture some of the unique aspects of education abroad. It does not, for example, have any questions that query whether or how the classroom instruction relates to the local environment or culture. We think it's important that all of our classes connect the subject content with the host environment. The SIR II does not help us with that item.

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We could develop our own instrument, our own course evaluation that students could complete—but then you lose all your norm scales, and comparative ability. Frankly the evaluations become somewhat anecdotal.

What are the problems? Well, we don't issue the SIR II or any other instrument to those students doing direct enroll, for obvious reasons. And conversely, partner institutions overseas either do not collect course evaluations or are reluctant to share them. Understandable position, but a challenge when you're looking for consistent, comparative academic quality across all programs. The grades become the major indicator of academic success, and to some degree of the quality of the program. And I'm sure you can see some of the complications that would come along with that approach.

To a very high degree, we rely on post-program student surveys to help us determine quality. Nearly all of these types of surveys are satisfaction-based surveys, although increasingly there are a number of instruments such as the IDI or the GPI, which are not satisfaction based. I throw out there for discussion that student satisfaction of a particular program is only a very small component of measuring program quality. But, in many instances it's the easiest thing to collect, and so therefore we perhaps overuse and over-interpret those results as indications of program quality—when by and large, they are not.

The idea of relying heavily on student satisfaction surveys as a measure of quality is problematic for a number of reasons. For one, I don't think that we as a field have sufficiently proven that these kinds of self-report surveys are in fact valid or reliable measures for anything other than a student's opinion in a particular moment in time. Are they valid measures of quality? Meaning when students are completing their surveys, are they in fact responding to the questions in the way you intended—or are they unintentionally connecting their personal feelings about their overall experience with the question about the program? A question about the quality of their housing, might in fact solicit a response based more on their interpersonal interactions with their roommates. Questions about being academically challenged, might in fact reflect the student response to the particular pedagogical approach—for example, students sometimes say that “the UK educational system was easier because we had less homework and weekly assignments”. Well, that's likely related to the student's lack of understanding about the differences in education style, and not really a comment on how easy it is comparatively. You can get around a lot of these problems by being quite specific with the survey questions, but by and large, most of the surveys I've seen don't

get to that level of sophistication—or they become so long and laborious that your response rates drop.

The other issue is reliability—which relates to whether you'd receive the same results consistently. The point in time that you issue the survey becomes critical to the results—especially if you're asking about student satisfaction. It's quite clear that students change their minds, or are responding based on where they are in the cultural adjustment process. Jaume here could tell you that student's get very concerned and quite unnerved when they can't figure out, let's say the metro system, or where to buy shampoo. It's a big deal—especially in those first few days. And if you ask them about their level of comfort and satisfaction when they're going through some of those issues, you might get some scary results—"this program is unsupportive", "I don't know what I'm doing". You ask the same question a couple of weeks later, once they've figured out how to navigate through that particular item and you'll get quite a different response. That's a pretty simple example...but the point is that we're often looking for a fixed response from the student, when in fact their experiences are fluid.

It doesn't mean the questions are worth asking, I whole-heartedly believe that they are. But, I do think that typical student surveys are better measures for the individual student experience, and rather quite poor in terms of over-arching program structure and quality. To come to those kinds of conclusions you need an understanding of program goals, pedagogy, etc.

Response rates are often quite low. We at Arcadia, typically receive post-program surveys from 60% of our students, which gives us quite a healthy pool of surveys to work with. However, when you start cutting the data by specific programs, it's not uncommon to have n's of 10 or less for a particular program. I would suspect that this is not a problem unique to Arcadia and it's something we all grapple with.

As one example, there's this study about drinking patterns in study abroad that's gotten quite a bit of exposure—concluding that student's increase their alcohol consumption while overseas, and that certain destinations witness more drinking than others. However, if you look into the numbers, some of the conclusions about certain regions are based on 7 students responding. That's not quality...in fact, it's quite irresponsible, in my opinion.

What we're really interested in doing, the point of all of this I think, is to enhance the academic experience, by introducing new concepts, ideas and experiences to the student that positively contributes to their personal and intellectual development and

leads them to be a positive contributor to their community. It seems that at a very basic level, when we're able to do those things well, we have quality. The challenge that we have is that we have largely avoided the issue of defining quality within the field, and therefore we run the risk of either having it defined for us by external forces who might not share our particular goals, or that we abandon the real notions and measures of quality in favor of what's easy to obtain.

To this end, the FORUM's Standards of Good Practice provide us with a great place to start. The FORUM has done a lot of the hard work by beginning to condense and articulate those specific items that we believe need to be present in order for a program to be described as one of quality. The next steps are for all of us to construct specific program goals that focus on learning objectives and then develop the direct measures to determine whether our programs are in fact achieving the goals as we intended them to do.

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