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4 / Regulating the Masses:

Quality and Equality in Higher Education

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Held to Account

This chapter will consider how discourses of quality and equality interact or collide in the context of massification and the changing demography of higher education. Questions will be raised about the appropriateness of applying quality assurance systems from industry to the complex social and intellectual processes of the academy. Attention will be paid to the current moral panic over standards and inflation of certification in higher education.

The juxtaposition of political and intellectual authority means that public service institutions over the last two decades, have been subject to 'human accounting' (Strathern, 1997). New structures, new rationalities and new regimes of regulation were introduced largely from the corporate context of the private sector ostensibly to promote efficiency, productivity, quality and cost-effectiveness in the public services. Values, as well as technologies and drive systems from the cultural world of business and commerce, have been imported into higher education, bringing with them new meanings, priorities and truths (Morley and Rassool, 1999).

In the context of the new compact between the state, higher education institutions, students and employers, the quality discourse has achieved hegemonic authority whereas the equality discourse has not. Ironically, New Right educational reform was able to effect more significant changes in the quantity and composition of the student body in higher education than two decades of equality legislation and organisational policies. The Dearing Report (1997) noted that only one third of higher education institutions with equal opportunities policies had plans directed towards their achievement (Watson and Taylor, 1998). However, there could be an equity paradox (Morley, 1997) in so far as the transition from an elite to a mass system has produced

1. Education reform
2. Equidad
3. Igualdad de oportunidades

considerable concerns about the quality of the higher education product. Just as under-represented groups begin to access higher education, the quality of the education product is called into question. This is reminiscent of Bourdieu's notion of distinction which allows the elite to constantly define and denote new forms of differentiation (Bourdieu, 1984).

After the 1992 FHE Act, the number of universities in Britain increased from 46 to 112. There was a rise in the number of students from 900,000 to 1,800,000 (from 15 to 33 per cent). The 'industrialisation' of higher education seemed to suggest that new systems of quality assurance needed to be introduced. Quality had previously been assured via the system of peer review and external examiners (Silver, 1993). This was increasingly regarded as imprecise, ad hoc and archaic by the modernisers. As Evans (1999, p. 147) indicates 'peer review is clearly not an exact science' (and quality assurance is?). In my experience, the notion of 'peer' frequently excludes considerations of exclusionary and discriminatory practices. It is often based on gendered networks and comradeship.

Massification raised questions about how to ensure quality and standards. Concerns also related to value for money and public accountability. Within the new compact, the requirement for reference points and benchmarks has steadily evolved. The new mass system represented a type of chaos that had to be managed via interventions associated with objective measurement. There has been an attempt to secure calculators of value, encoded in performance indicators and league tables (Cave et al., 1997). In the 1985 Green Paper (DES), the government saw the development of performance indicators as the key to demonstrate value for money. As Laurillard (1980, p. 187) observed, performance indicators 'reduce a complexity of subjective judgements to a single objective measure'. However, I wish to argue that the quality discourse in higher education is a technology masking an ideology, with values, priorities, panics and prejudices thinly disguised in the language of standards and excellence.

Human capital theory has also been more overtly applied to higher education in relation to global competitiveness and national prosperity (Dearing, 1997). Within the context of the changing relations between the state and universities, there is now an input/output mindset. Members of the new compact want reassurance and a common language relating to standards. The state wants a return on its investment, and this is linked to the three Es of new managerialism – economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

There is an implied relationship between accountability and improvement. Quality has become a vast industry which dominates organisational culture in the academy today. To some, quality assurance represents a form of consumer

empowerment, introducing accountability into dominant organisations of knowledge production. Quality relates to 'fitness for purpose' and measurement of outcomes in relation to product specifications, 'zero defect', effectiveness in achieving institutional goals and success in meeting customers' stated or implied needs (Green, 1995). Quality indicators are assumed to provide information which allows consumers to make informed choices. This notion assumes that choice, decision-making and consumption are rational processes open to reason.

However, quality audits are sometimes perceived as transformational devices. The scrutiny of organisations is seen as a refreshing challenge to elitism and to disciplinary authority (Luke, 1997). For others, quality in general, and total quality management (TQM) in particular, represent an example of surveillance and regulation, with a primary aim to render employees more docile, compliant and governmentable (Ball, 1997). The technology of quality assurance is seen as process of impression management and performativity, with performance indicators socially and politically constructed.

The Genesis of the Discourse

Quality became an issue with the advent of industrialisation, relating to elimination of waste (time, materials, money) and safety. Quality gained currency in Japanese industry in the 1940s and 1950s and was applied specifically to the public services in the USA and UK in the 1980s. Japan appeared to have made a significant economic recovery after the second world war. The West attempted to decode Japanese economic success. Japanese work practices were imported into different sectors of British manufacturing production – and at first – in the car manufacturing industry. According to Imai (1986) the key to the overall success of Japanese business and industry lies first in the philosophical concept of *kaizen*. *Kaizen*, literally translated, means continuous improvement 'involving everyone, including both managers and workers' (Imai, 1986, p. 3). Imai (ibid.) states that '[t]he *kaizen* philosophy assumes that our way of life – be it our working life, our social life, or our home life – deserves to be constantly improved'. There is never an endpoint. This is now strongly associated with neo-Fordist employment regimes, lifelong learning, continuous professional development and the politics of flexibility (Jessop et al., 1991).

In a period of rapid technological and social change, the world has become a riskier place (Beck, 1992). Skill requirements are constantly in flux. Power

(1997) argues that quality assurance is about seeking comfort and certainties. Quality was originally associated with quality control, and was part of Fordist production processes. It consisted of the detection and elimination of components or final products which were not up to standard. It was invariably undertaken by inspectors/controllers, rather than by the workers themselves. In education, this translated into external inspections consisting of observations and judgements. The emphasis gradually moved away from control and towards quality assurance. Systems were put in place throughout the production process, with a quest for zero defect. In education, this is often represented as the quest for excellence (DfEE, 1997). Institutions are not just evaluated on the students' performance, but the provision that is made for getting them to that point.

In 1991 the Further Education Unit (FEU) published what was to become a highly influential document in the framing of the quality debate in British education. *Quality Matters* (FEU, 1991, p. 2) positioned the concept of quality in education within the framework of manufacturing industry's definition of 'fitness for purpose' which, it argued, is 'arrived at through conformance to specification'. The document emphasised 'the search for opportunities for improvement rather than maintaining current performance' (ibid.). Organisations are required constantly to evaluate, research, analyse and measure needs, results and effectiveness as part of the process of continuous improvement (FEU, 1991). The emphasis is increasingly on the tangible. For example, between 1992–98, it is estimated that about 30 per cent of UK HEIs adopted an outcomes-based curriculum (Jackson, 1999).

Managing Quality

The regulation and management of quality in higher education has been a fairly fragmented affair. In 1990 the CVCP set up an Academic Audit Unit (which lasted for two years). In 1992 the Higher Education Quality Council was established. In 1997 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was set up (after the Dearing Report). It is important to stress that there are now at least two accounting systems for academics. Just as the workforce was acclimatising to research audit, teaching became highlighted as a signifier of excellence and productivity. Subject reviews have been introduced and the Institute for Learning and Teaching opened in 1999 to provide professional development for university teachers. While the two accounting systems could be seen as an example of multiskilling, this often results in academics experiencing split

focusing (Coate et al., 2000), with oppositional relationships developing between teaching and research and publication (Morley, 1995).

Managing quality represents a considerable financial and temporal investment. A criticism of quality in relation to higher education is that quality is being promoted at a time when public funding is decreasing. For example, public funding per student in higher education has fallen by more than 40 per cent since 1976. The student:staff ratios moved from 9.3:1 in the old universities and 8.4:1 in the former polytechnics to an overall figure of 16.5:1 (Watson and Bowden, 1999). There is also an increasing casualisation of labour and decreasing employment conditions in higher education. However, the quality discourse attempts to demonstrate how standards can rise even when investments and employment rights drop, thus demonstrating the profligacy of pre-managerialist regimes.

The euphemism 'efficiency gains' for the cuts in higher education asserts that cuts in unit costs have not lowered the quality of the education provided by British universities (Trow, 1998). Hence quality may be being audited in conditions of funding and employment that could be eroding it. The well-being of the work force is not perceived as a quality issue. There is little attention given to occupational stress, intensification and longer working hours (AUT, 1996).

Quality could well be seen as a massive displacement activity, distracting attention away from under-resourcing and focusing on naming and shaming of individual organisations (Carvel, 1999). However, it is extremely effective, as naming is a significant aspect in the constitution of identity. As Butler (1997, p. 2) observed: 'to be called a name is one of the first forms of injury that one learns'. The labelling of universities iterates and inscribes the discourses in a complex chain of signification. Audit and the ensuing certification and grading means that private in-house matters are now in the public domain. The results of audit provide a reified reading, which becomes a truth. For universities at the bottom of the league tables, identity is a form of negative equity. The damage to reputation becomes an attack on the competence of every organisational member. For those at the top, there is an artificial halo effect which invites the projection of a range of positive attributes on to their services. These identities have cash value in the market place. What is frequently undertheorised is how this labelling corresponds with the social class of the different constituencies. Elitism is reinforced and quality accolades are socially decontextualised. Some of the universities with high RAE scores have the lowest percentage of working class students. For example, between 1972 and 1993 the independent school proportion of the entry at

70 *A Compact for Higher Education*

Oxbridge increased from 38 to 57 per cent (McCrum, 1998). Major (1999) cited how the London School of Economics has more applications from the top socioeconomic classes, with just under 70 per cent of UK admitted students from professional and managerial backgrounds in 1997–98, whereas some of the new universities with lower research assessment exercise (RAE) scores, such as Wolverhampton, Central Lancashire and Thames Valley have less than one third from that social group.

The Quality Gaze

Quality is a messy business. It has its product champions and raging critics. The insertion of the quality discourse into higher education represents a challenge to the Medieval achievement of separating the idea of intellectual authority from political authority (Finch, 1997). For some, this is perceived as an intrusion into academic freedom. Peters (1992, p. 128) argues that quality assurance 'will effectively cut across entrenched values of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, collegiality, peer review, cooperation and support which are at the heart of both local and international (academic) communities'. However, Luke (1997, p. 436) asks whether the 'Golden Age of Academic Autonomy Prior to Managerialism' was, in fact 'an epoch of access, equity and enfranchisement for women and people of colour?'. In this context, quality assurance can be seen as a long overdue attempt to make dominant organisations of knowledge production more accountable and transparent in their procedures.

Set in a broader analytical framework, the obsession with quality assurance is also a by-product of the risk society in which there has been a major decline in trust (Beck, 1992; Kramer and Tyler, 1996). Untrustworthy behaviour in the professions is perceived as costly, dangerous and wasteful. The failing university is as much a threat to public safety as the engine falling off an aeroplane. As Power (1997, p. 103) suggests: 'The performance culture of rewards and penalties is a refusal to trust.'

As suggested by Sitkin and Roth (1993), escalating cycles of distrust are frequently misunderstood as being rooted in details associated with reliability and competence. Trust, accountability and competence have been discursively linked. There is now a mania for classifying competencies in professional and higher education. There is also considerable preoccupation with reliable organisations (Slee et al., 1998). Predictability offers some indemnity against risk. Scores in the RAE and the subject review operate as performative

utterances signifying a ritualistic movement from one state to another, similar to sentencing in the judicial service. It has both cognitive and emotional power, reassuring consumers of safety and classifying areas of strength and weakness. However, a further irony is how we are invited to place total trust in the auditors, many of whom are drawn from the profession on trial in the first place. The compilers and executors of taxonomies of effectiveness are left unproblematised. The audited are knowable agents, and a central criticism of the quality discourse is that it is a one-way gaze.

On Edge

Similar to the notion of original sin in Christianity, the construction of the individual and the organisation as being in deficit and in need of continuous improvement can be a powerful regulatory device. The mindset of never being satisfied can create an urgency and compliance that shifts attention away from values and ideologies and towards technologies and competencies. Hence, vast amounts of energy are invested in enhancing effectiveness, quality, learning and productivity rather than questioning whose interests are being served. Indeed, the endpoint of continuous improvement clearly is unclear. Strathern (1997, p. 307) argues that this lack of closure brings with it a 'morality of attainment'.

'Improvement' is wonderfully open-ended, for it at once describes effort and results. And it invites one to make both ever more effective – a process from which the tests themselves are not immune; measuring the improvement leads to improving the measures.

Quality is riven with ironies and discontinuities. Ball (1999, p. 197) identifies how Labour's education policies can be understood and analysed as a 'synthesis between market and social democratic values'. Started by the New Right, but continued by New Labour, quality now contains a mixture of democratic and economic imperatives. Sallis (1996) argues that there are four imperatives embedded in the quality discourse: moral, professional, competitive, and accountability. The multi-layering of imperatives, alongside the command economy, where funding is linked to external assessments, means that quality is difficult to contest and resist. Continuous improvement can represent opportunity for personal development and consumer empowerment. It challenges routinisation and staleness in the workplace. By calling

professionals to account and producing codified signifiers of value, it also purports to challenge expert power and the mystification of professional processes. However, value is socially constructed, with judgements and interpretations of worth politically situated.

For many, interpretative academic freedom in education was causally linked to low standards. Indeed, by the time that the Conservative Government came to power in 1979:

Education had come to epitomize much that was seen to be wrong with burgeoning state power. It was construed as expensive, not self-evidently adequately productive, insufficiently accountable, monopolistic, producer-dominated, a bastion of an entrenched professional elite, resistant to consumer demand and, at worst, self-generating and self-serving (Fergusson, 1994, p. 93).

In many respects, the higher education system needed to be opened up to scrutiny. It is debatable whether scrutinising quality and standards have promoted or eclipsed equity issues.

Within the standards approach to quality there is an emphasis on organisations and individuals regulating themselves. The auditing gaze is both internal and external, as educational institutions are subjected to inspection. Hierarchical observation often results in the self-surveillance of the observed. This self-regulation is an example of how power can be capillary, rather than monolithic. A capillary notion of power suggests that power operates everywhere in everyday transactions. It is totalising in so far as it is rehearsed in inter and intrapersonal relations, as well as in structures (Morley, 1999). Brown (1998) argues that the most critical aspect of the new quality framework is the relationship between external and internal assessments. For example, providers of subjects now compile a self-assessment document that reflects the areas open to external assessment. Power (1994, pp. 36–7) notes:

What is audited is whether there is a system which embodies standards and the standards of performance themselves are shaped by the need to be auditable ... audit becomes a formal 'loop' by which the system observes itself.

The feedback loop and customer care have been important features of quality assurance in higher education, with the introduction of: handbooks, guidelines, codes of practice, student opinion surveys, a students' charter and staff development. The customer, however, remains a universal subject, without gender, social class or ethnicity.

Quality as a Regulatory Device

I wish to argue that quality is not a neutral notion; rather, it is a subjective category of description and its meaning derives from its point of articulation. Hoppers (1994, p. 175) reminds us that:

Quality is a multi-dimensional concept and its interpretation is dependent on the interests of the different actors in the process and outcomes in the enterprise.

There are questions about who defines quality, and indeed, whose interests it represents. There is also the question whether standards are absolute or relative. The measures themselves are questionable. For example, Elton (1998) notes that there is a higher proportion of firsts in 'hard' subjects such as engineering and mathematics, than in 'soft' subjects such as history and French. He believes that this is more to do with assessment procedures than the ability of students.

There is little sociology in quality assurance. Quality assurance can be technicist and reductive in focus. Quality is often socially decontextualised. For example, in the context of subject review, the segment of student experience that is audited is predominantly their role as learners (Haselgrove, 1994). There are complex areas of higher education that are difficult to measure, quantify and capture e.g. processes, the affective domain, attitudes and values. In this framework, a sexist, racist tutor who gets good completion rates is deemed to be effective. The gaps and silences in taxonomies of effectiveness are often where equity issues constellate (Morley and Rassool, 1999). Discursive technologies of power produce, reproduce, marginalise and resist particular knowledges. Ball (1997) argues that quality is a technology for cultural engineering, with strong normative connotations. TQM is merely a way of ensuring the achievement of state policies, through a 'combination of micro-disciplinary practices and steering at a distance' (Ball, 1997, p. 322). TQM is also perceived as a system of government of employees. Tacit professional practices are bureaucratised and a panopticon culture is promoted (Foucault, 1979a and b). The quality discourse is an effective way of ensuring compliance and docility of employees by establishing a set of goals and objectives that are not always negotiable. For example, how much linguistic agency do universities have in the quality assurance framework?

Quality audits could also be perceived as positivistic. There is a notion that organisations are knowable via the appropriate instruments, checklists and taxonomies. The complexities of teaching and learning, for example have

been reduced to six categories. Epistemological questions about these variables and methods are left unexamined. This approach inevitably only addresses a surface organisational rationality, and yet this becomes a truth. In quality assurance procedures, organisations have to represent their identities discursively. As Luke argues (1997, p. 440) 'a document of narrative prose suggests a textual version of the Foucauldian confessional' (Foucault (1979a and b). Quality audits encourage performativity (Lyotard, 1984), as organisations tend to give aspirational accounts of themselves within certain prescribed parameters.

Quality as Consumer Empowerment

An argument in favour of quality is that it condenses complex professional processes into easily identifiable information for consumers. The use of league tables, grades for teaching quality and RAE scores can be indicators to assist choice-making processes. Similarly, benchmarking is often seen as a type of classification and framing exercise in the midst of the potential chaos of expansion in higher and further education. This can be seen as elite organisations being forced to become more user-friendly, particularly to those users who lack the cultural capital and social advantages often required for educational decision-making. Voice discourse is also a potent aspect of consumer empowerment (Morley, 1998). The reconstruction of students as consumers and clients gives the appearance of changing power relationships between purchasers and providers of the educational product. Quality audits could be said to privilege users' voices by measuring customer satisfaction via the use of evaluation instruments and consumer surveys.

In terms of equity, greater transparency of procedures can sometimes make discriminatory and exclusionary practices more visible. One view is that quality audits can be used by women as a mechanism for what Yeatman (1990) calls 'equity-oriented change management' (Luke, 1997, p. 437). The 'panoptic' gaze of audit can bring marginalised groups into the light. The emphasis on continuing professional development and on accountability can challenge expert power and routinisation. There is the potential for organisational reflexivity as preparation for quality audits can provide some discursive space for reflecting on practices, assumptions, and procedures. Quality audits are also perceived as transformational devices, allowing questions to be posed about whether equity provisions are measures of excellence, e.g. arrangements for students with special needs. If one takes a Foucauldian analysis of power,

quality can be both oppressive and creative. Quality is a complex and contradictory affair. While I am critical of many of the stress-inducing regulatory functions, I have to admit to having experienced some delight several years ago, when some non-functioning, inactive colleagues who put most of their energies into making life a misery for more competent female colleagues, were flushed out and publicly graded 'unsatisfactory' by inspectors!

Conclusion

The standardisation implied in quality assurance can suggest normalisation. In the context of the new compact, there are dangers of homogenising teachers and learners and creating a universal subject and organisational isomorphism. Currently, very diverse organisations are placed on the same continuum for research excellence, for example. This automatically disadvantages those organisations with diverse populations, as Wagner (1989, p. 36) points out: 'It is those who restrict access by accepting only students with the highest traditional qualifications which receive status, privilege, honours and resources.'

The technology of quality assurance is perceived as a reductive input/output model. It is seen as a process of impression management and performativity, with performance indicators socially and politically constructed. It implies solutions, best practice, orthodoxies and consensus. The technology masks the ideology and value base of what is considered excellent at this particular political and historical moment (Ball, 1997).

As part of the modernisation programme, the current government has invested large sums of money in quality assurance. There is an implied relationship between accountability and improvement. Accountability has been linked to public information. The rhetoric of improvement is related to organisational development and continuous professional development. However, in spite of this vast machinery, there is little evidence to suggest that the quality of student or staff experiences has been enhanced, or whether the role that higher education plays in social reproduction has been interrupted. There has been an intensification of bureaucracy for staff which inevitably impacts on the amount of time and good attention available for students. Quality audits can both expose inequalities and reinforce them, by sealing staff into rigid hierarchies of accountability, and by creating a sense of fear and instability.

It is doubtful whether the evidence collected via quality audits reflects wider social transformations and shifting student demographics. Many of these

concerns have crystallised around the issue of value-added i.e. ensuring that people exit with better characteristics than they possessed at the point of input (Brennan et al., 1997). However, issues of diversity and equity are only superficially addressed. Multifaceted qualitative processes such as pedagogical relations and barriers to participation are reduced to quantitative indicators (Morley, 2000). Vexed political questions relating to power and knowledge are condensed into concerns about course documentation, waiting time for essay feedback etc. It is dubious whether audit detects complex microprocesses of power in organisations (Morley, 1999). Meanwhile, the rhetoric of continuous improvement is a powerful message system to students and staff, informing them of their lack and deficit, in an attempt to make them more governmentable. Concerns about the authenticity of the exercise abound. Yet auditors and auditees perform a type of comedy of manners. We speak the discourse and the discourse speaks us. Quality audits are textual and grammatocentric, relying on reported practices within predetermined criteria. Complicity in this performance is partly because quality ratings play a pivotal role in capitalist modes of exchange. In the new compact, there is almost a form of contract compliance at work.

Quality in higher education offers normalising judgements that compare, differentiate, categorise, homogenise, correct and exclude. Discursive performatives not only act to constitute organisational realities they appear to describe, they simultaneously position these realities as existing prior to the description and intervention, e.g. falling standards. Quality assurance interventions actively produce the contexts in which they operate. In preparing for quality audits, organisations focus their attention and resources on the areas to be audited. While there is a claim to report realities, the quality discourse is actually responsible for constructing them in the first place.

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5 A Compact for Higher Education: A Case Study of the Thames Gateway

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This chapter seeks to illustrate the concept of a compact for higher education by considering what would be entailed in introducing such a compact to one geographical area of England. The case study area taken is the 'Thames Gateway' – the estuary of the Thames below central London – an area engaged in large scale economic regeneration. It presents the results of analysis of the 1996 Research Assessment Exercise in the Thames Gateway higher education institutions (HEIs) and discusses what this implies for the future of the local learning infrastructure within the local economy and community. It then outlines what a compact for higher education might mean in the Thames Gateway. It argues that further entrenchment of the divide between research and teaching universities is unlikely to serve the needs to regional economic regeneration and that links need to stretch across these sectors and to encompass further education, as well as local economic and community organisations.

Introduction: Regeneration and Learning in the Thames Gateway

The 'Thames Gateway' is a recently-invented term referring to the banks of the Thames from Tower Bridge eastwards towards the sea. It replaces the previously current expression 'East Thames Corridor'. The Regional Planning Guidance (Department for the Environment, 1995) defines it as lying between the A13 road and the river on the north bank and the A2 road and the river on the south bank. From this geographical definition it can be noted that the area:

- is linear;
- is divided by the river;