Sample Masters Education Essay

The introduction of the quality discourse represents the industrialisation of higher and professional education

THE QUALITY DEBATE

The quality discourse

One of the hottest issues in debate, currently and during the last 20 years, is that related with quality, quality improvement and quality assurance in higher education. The causes for the introduction of the quality discussion, the use of quality assurance systems and all its consequent terminology (inputs/outputs, standards, performance indicators, efficiency and productivity) and methodologies (audits, peer review, or external/internal review) are commonly known.

In essence, these reasons can be synthesised in two main groups. Firstly, institutions of higher education have been feeling the imperative necessity of a managerial change due to the categorical transformation of their external environment (Hall. 1996) The external environment is the increasingly globalised and 'supercomplex' world (Barnett. 2000). For some authors this is more important than factors such as the imposition of a quality control by the state (Brennan & Shah. 2000). A society with more complex characteristics in comparison with the past calls for a different kind of relationship with higher education systems, and higher education needs to cope with these changes, as it will be commented below. Nevertheless, as Jackson points out, 'the scale, speed and nature of the changes have had a profound impact on all aspects of teaching, learning, administrative and managerial practice' (Jackson. 1998) p. 133), and not only in the managerial one.

On the one hand, some other of this group of factors are the progressive reduction of the government funding support per student unit (Harman. 1998); (Jackson. 1998), deregulation of the sector and the increasing market competition between institutions, and 'pressures from employers and professions to become more relevant to work place needs' (Harman. 1998) p. 347). On the other, there is the explosion of knowledge with 'new expertise, new approaches to research and new ways of managing science' (Barblan. 1997) p. 174), and a growing emphasis upon the needs of consumers (Hall. 1996).

The second main group of reasons includes a massive expansion of the higher education systems, generally driven by political and economic interests. In Britain, for instance, the number of universities increased from 46 to 112 after 1992; the number of undergraduate courses or programmes rose from 8,000 to 50,000 (Jackson. 2000); the number of students doubled from 900,000 to 1,800,000 and the student/staff ratio rose from 8-9:1 to 16.5:1 (Morley[1]. 2000).

The increase in the number of students as well as the number of universities, the deterioration of student/staff ratios and the growing range of programmes and curriculum choices have reduced the credibility on the capacity of higher education systems or institutions for internally regulating and maintaining quality and standards in a way in which the interests of the society are protected. It is difficult to understand how universities can teach more students with less money and the same number of teachers than in the past, and maintain the same standards. It is also hard to understand how standards can be comparable across this more diverse and large higher education system (Jackson. 1998).

In a context in which it is believed that science and rationality are powerful tools to lead countries to social and economic improvement (Broadfoot. 1998), this situation of massification has led to changes in the relationship between state and higher education. The state and the society, in western countries, claim for to make higher education systems more equitable, more accountable for the public investment and more open and transparent to public enquiry.

Other determinant factors can also be contemplated, such as the creation of new learning opportunities (for example programmes for continuous quality improvement in companies or public services, or state programmes of training for women or unemployed people), the growth of inter and multi-disciplinary programmes (with the, also controversial, generic skills) (Jackson. 1998) and hyper-specialisation programmes, new generations of teachers that are often hired without having completed their PhD, not providing evidence that 'they had internalised the standards of the trade' (Barblan. 1997) p. 175), and a growing international competitiveness. All of them could have contributed to a flaw of the sense of purpose and identity in universities; and the feeling of the necessity to introduce quality assurance systems and to define standards.

Different conceptions of quality

One of the factors that largely fuels the debate is the different conceptions and views of what quality should be. Each different notion of quality entails an ideology about how higher education should be (Barnett. 1992); (Brennan & Shah. 2000), and, as it will be noted in this section, there are many different conceptions about higher education.

Irrespective of the fact that it could seem outdated or oversimplified, it is useful to cite here, for the purpose and clarity of this paper, two main meanings of quality defined by Barnett: instrumental and communicative. The *instrumental* version is related to the following dominant concepts of higher education: i) as the production of qualified manpower, ii) as a training of researchers, iii) as an efficient management of teaching provision and iv) as response to demands of consumers (Barnett. 1992). In this approach, quality assessment and higher education are focused on inputs and outputs of the system and there exists a predisposition to neglect the process of the educational experience. The result of this ideology is the tendency to create external and 'summative' (Barblan. 1997) forms of quality evaluation. The tools to use in this kind of evaluation tend to be standards and performance indicators.

Furthermore, four other approaches to higher education can be linked to the communicative version of quality. These approaches are more oriented towards the individual educational processes, such as i) the development of the individual student's autonomy, ii) their intellectual abilities, iii) their individual character or iv) their competence to participate in critical debate (Barnett. 1992). These conceptions tend to see quality appraisal as an internal and 'supportive' (Barblan. 1997) procedure. For this process, peer-review and self-assessment seem to be a more congruent methodology.

Ramsden (1998) offers other different views of quality in higher education. The focus on the interest or purpose of the quality is the determinant of the variety. One of each could present different developments and risks. The 'exceptional' view, in which 'quality is synonymous with excellence' (p. 42) focuses on the perpetuation of higher education as elite, and tends to maintain the exclusion of the disadvantaged people; while the 'transformation' view (ibid), in which quality is change from one level to a better one,

is more congruent with a system focused on the student and issues such as accessibility and widening opportunities. However, who defines the benevolent character of the change is an added problem.

Other conceptions of quality, suggested by Ramsden (1998), could be associated with other risks. The 'perfection' view, which is related with outcomes and final product, could lead to the use of quality assessment as the total quality management is used in industry and production. The 'fitness for purpose' view is related with customer needs, and the danger is that knowledge could be atomised, losing coherence, and the congruence of titles and professions could be at risk. Finally, the conception of quality as 'value for money', said it in terms of return of investment, could empower the student as customer and consumer but may constrain higher education to a mere market.

Quality management, moreover, can be also perceived in different ways. For instance, Doherty (1994, quoted in (Hall. 1996)) acknowledges that most educationists perceive total quality management as closer to the traditional educational values than other approaches of quality assurance systems. This is because, from the total quality management point of view, the quality management should pervade the institution, so the people more directly responsible for quality (lecturers and departments) are allowed to manage it. In opposition, other approaches based on standards and performance are seen as an external imposition. In these approaches, the focus of the quality management is on the final product, neglecting the importance of the whole process of education.

Instrumentalist conceptions of higher education, as those narrowly related with outcomes, final students performance or market needs, could tend to place excessive confidence on external or strongly centralised management of the quality assurance procedures. Therefore, industrialisation could be the consequence of the implementation of a quality culture in which these approaches prevail over conceptions more oriented towards educational processes and students learning experience.

Quality assurance models or systems are answering to the different visions that institutions or governments have of quality and higher education. Different authors provide different definitions of quality assurance ((Harman. 1998); (Boyle & Bowden. 1997); (Cave. 1997); (Yorke. 1999)). Harman proposes a general definition:

> 'systematic management and assessment procedures adopted to ensure achievement of specified quality or improved quality, and to enable key stakeholders to have confidence in the management of quality and the outcomes achieved'. (Harman. 1998) p. 346).

Furthermore, Harman (1998) indicates that the diverse systems for quality assurance created in different countries are in rapid evolution and they are the consequence of the different emphasis put on the various elements of the management, such as administrative responsibility, voluntary or compulsory participation, methodologies of review, national or institutional level, purposes and the kind of reporting and follow-up activities. These different approaches lead to diverse levels of control from the state, openness to the market and stakeholders satisfaction.

In spite of this diversity, Boyle and Bowden (Boyle & Bowden. 1997) suggest that all definitions assume that some of the characteristics of the quality assurance process are common for all approaches, including i) a 'planned and systematic action' (p.115), ii) the activities include a range of aspects such as planning, evaluating or motivating, and iii) definition of goals, values and expected outcomes and how these are serving the needs of the stakeholders.

It seems clear that quality assurance is an intricate idea, reflecting 'the character of the extraordinarily complex human interactive process' (Barnett. 1992) p. 21) which is higher education. Nonetheless, Boyle and Bowden claim that it is possible to establish some categories or issues more or less common to all. These categories are similar with those identified by Harman and commented above. These categories are: i) values, principles and plans, ii) leadership and management, iii) people, iv) customer-client focus, v) evaluation, information and continuous quality improvement, and vi) structures, policy and procedures (Boyle & Bowden. 1997).

The analysis and inclusion of these aspects are essential for generating quality assurance frameworks. Boyle and Bowden also propose that a comprehensive and integrated approach to quality assurance is needed, if 'significant and durable positive outcomes are to be achieved' (Boyle & Bowden. 1997) p. 115).

There exists a possibility of consensus

As Barnett (1992) argues, there exists a 'higher order' of concepts and perspectives which are logically superior to others because of their 'greater explanatory power' (p. 26), and the modern adult learning theory offers two essential features of the foundations of the knowledge: reflexivity and metacognition (Barnett. 1992). In institutions of higher education, students should attain these aptitudes and this kind of knowledge. In this regard, this paper comes to adhere the idea that quality in a specific institution can be evident in its character of the teaching and learning process and in the educational attainments of the students.

The quality should be assessed by the measure of institutions paying attention into the more strategic aspects directly affecting the student experience of learning and, hence, their achievements. As Barnett (1992) emphasizes, teaching and learning, assessing students process, staff development and quality assurance procedures have to be the central part of any quality appraisal in institutions of higher education. Furthermore, it is here assumed that modern pedagogical theories, which acknowledge the influence of learning environments upon the engagement of students to the subjects, are essential part in training good professionals. It is believed, moreover, that good learning is more likely to happen in institutions which have the student experience as essential priority.

As Ramsden (Ramsden. 1998) indicates, there is a general level in which the most interested in higher education agree on what should be the desirable students' attainments; these include the development of critical thinking and the understanding and application of general principles. In the words of Barrow (1991), 'the general educational aims of autonomy, of the ability to participate in reasoned discourse, of critical self-evaluation, and of coming to a proper awareness of the ultimate contingency of all thought and action' (quoted by Barnett 1992 p. 61).

This paper presumes that this kind of general agreement and, consequently, a common starting point to define what should be quality in higher education are achievable in spite of the uncountable differences. If it is possible to reach a consensus on how to assess students learning and the process of learning facilitation by teachers; thus, it is possible to achieve an agreement on how to evaluate the quality of these

processes. Although it could be not in a complete or absolute manner, it could be in an acceptable one for the most interested people.

Through this paper, the author shows her agreement with the conception that the educational process is the core of the activities of higher education institutions, and their main purpose is to educate good professionals to serve society. This is without detriment of other possible commendable aims, including research and the development of arts or other fields not directly related with the more 'pragmatic' professions. Furthermore, as Boyle and Bowden stress, 'educational institutions have as one of their primary purposes, and obligations to the community and their students, the provision of education of the highest possible quality' (1997 p. 113).

In this regard, quality assurance systems have an instrumental characteristic. The social responsibility is not only the duty of rendering account to the society for the public monies. The social responsibility is to assure that competent professionals (who in certain cases will take direct care of people, such as clinicians, nurses or teachers) are provided to the society. It is not only the role of the government to assure this, but also needs to be a real commitment of institutions, academics and students.

Quality assurance systems are necessary to guarantee that this social responsibility is taken on; but effectively there is some risk of industrialisation, lose of purpose, perspective or values in higher education in indiscriminately applying quality assurance systems, if some precautions are not adopted. An instrumentalist vision of quality, as is proposed here, though, should be very aware of the dangers of blindly putting all expectations and beliefs in quality assurance systems. Most of the ideologies underpinning quality assurance policies could combine different attitudes and consciousness, and contemplate the implementation of mechanisms for counteracting these dangers.

THE RISKS COULD BE AVOIDED

There are some issues extremely sensitive for the discussion. They are fertilised land for presenting dangers directly or indirectly related with the risk of industrialisation. Some of them are indicated below in this section.

Identity and values

The loss of academic values, as freedom and autonomy, is one of the most common complaints against quality assurance processes. A balance in the representation of the various groups of interest, including staff, students, employers, and religious, ideological or ethnic local or minority groups, has to be achieved. It is essential to be aware of the different values they attribute to quality.

Brennan and Shah (2000) explain how quality assessment is sometimes controversial because of the different conceptions of quality in higher education, and identify four major types of 'quality values': 'academic', 'managerial', 'pedagogic' and 'employment focused' (p. 14). Each of them represents diverse groups interested in maintaining quality with different perspectives, attitudes and approaches to power and management of quality. From the perspective of the social responsibility that is here defended, the pedagogic values should be the most relevant ones and, hence, the priority for being accomplished. However, the other different values should not be excluded.

In accordance with Boyle and Bowden (1997), it is also important to consider historical, political and academic cultural issues. In any case, the most direct responsible of the quality of the learning experience are lecturers and departments; the failure to take account of their characteristics will inevitably impede change and development.

Quality for change

A strong institutional management is necessary, due to the complexity of the current 'external environment, and the need for faster decision-making to effect the changes perceived to be necessary to ensure future success, and even survival' (Brennan & Shah. 2000) p. 87). Quality assessment methodologies can provide useful managerial tools, including essential data and evidence on which policy-making should be based. Quality management has revealed as an important mechanism to facilitate this change in many countries (Brennan & Shah. 2000). These changes have been driving higher

education institutions towards more accurate self-evaluation, and indicators can help the evaluation of institutional weaknesses and strengths.

Indicators of performance are observable and competence can be deduced from them (Eraut. 1995). This does not mean that this paper is claiming the reductivism or oversimplification of knowledge and the practice of the professions. On the contrary, competence is a complex concept which includes at least basic skills, generic skills, personal attributes and continuous development. Senior professionals and experts should understand and agree the meaning of performance indicators, with their values and limitations; and use them as a basis to evaluate quality and quality improvement in higher education institutions, within their contexts and different missions. They should be able to do this without danger of abuse of a so-called 'performance ideology' (Broadfoot. 1998) p. 176).

Legitimacy and credibility

An external supportive review by Association of European Rectors (CRE) Programme of Institutional Evaluation has demonstrated that a rapid understanding of the institutional problems by the audit panel can occur, even if the activities of the review were apart of the 'immediate daily practice of quality management' (Barblan. 1997) p. 195). In this case the panel was conformed by peers and experts.

One of the problems presented by quality assessment through peer-review is the legitimacy and credibility of their authority. Legitimacy implies that people accept the authority of those who are evaluating. Traditionally, legitimacy is accepted by academics on the basis of a 'collective understanding' of the different disciplines (Brennan & Shah. 2000). Peers have moral authority to make judgements based on expertise and in shared values within their professional body. But there are other groups who also have the authority to claim for results and, hence, to evaluate. 'For these groups, legitimacy may be achieved through criteria other than disciplinary understanding' (Brennan & Shah. 2000) p. 18).

Inclusion

The concept of consumer empowerment emerges as one of the advantages of the quality culture, and it means the increasing number of opportunities for people to participate in higher education and to make

choices about goods of consumption (Field. 1996). However, this could be seen as a perpetuation of the inequities of the economics of consumption, in which groups of people are kept excluded from these pretended universal choices.

In contrast, the empowerment of other groups, different from those that traditionally have a voice in society, could also be one of the advantages of the quality culture (Morley. 2000). Ethnic minorities, excluded or discriminated groups could find their opportunity to express their claims in this quality culture which now enables more transparency than in the past. The results of the quality evaluation could evidence inequities between groups of people, and this can lead to questioning the reasons for these inequities, and allow answering them from the perspective of the minority.

Quality assurance systems could also enhance inclusion because they make evident the tendency of higher education towards the reproduction of its hierarchies and the achievement of its academic staff's interests, rather than the benefit of students, employers, governments or the society, including minority groups (Ramsden 1998). Judgements and results of quality processes should be transparently based on information and evidence. This can greatly support rationality in decision-making and promote equal influence of the existing interest groups (Brennan & Shah. 2000).

In addition, the collection of information and their periodical explanation enhance transparency and accountability. The creation of quality assurance systems within institutions could facilitate the definition of objectives, turning implicit processes of learning into factual information (Barblan. 1997); and evidence to what extent these objectives have been met. Through quality evaluation, institutions can show confirmation of their quality work, attracting sponsors, employers and students.

Responsibility and power

Quality assurance can be seen as a new source of 'motivation and recognition for staff' (Brennan & Shah. 2000) p. 2). Rewards, through enhancing reputation, increasing funding and improving influence, can increase satisfaction and levels of productivity in staff and students if good results are obtained in the exercise of evaluation. But disappointment and frustration may also occur if the results are negative.

Making the whole process participative, focused on improvement and promoting the use of adequate tools for change could avoid this detrimental effect.

Some cultures of quality tend to give responsibility about quality to each person in the institution (Barnett. 1992). In a decentralised system, departments and individuals adopt their own responsibility for assuring and enhancing the quality of their own courses. It is crucial to avoid the concentration of the managerial power in conducting the process (Gibbs. 1995), because it reduces the feeling of responsibility between all levels of staff.

As Brennan and Shah emphasize, 'the introduction of systems of quality assessment frequently involve changing the balance of power between the institutional and system levels' ((Brennan & Shah. 2000) p. 13). Departmental leaders and senior academics 'have traditionally enjoyed the most status and power' (Brennan & Shah. 2000) p. 16). Quality assurance systems should lead to sharing this power, without strengthening one department over others, managers over academics, or academics over students.

Educational evaluation has a powerful potential in controlling individuals and institutions. The methodology adopted by quality assurance systems is the main factor which decides the degree or intensity of this control. Alienation is the danger here, the more centralisation of the system, the more control by the state, or in Neave's words, the traditional form of 'State control' (Neave. 1998)). The extent to which the state establishes methodologies, norms and rules defines the control that it exercises. A strong, centralised control prevents the possibility for addressing needs or peculiarities of the local higher education systems.

But decentralisation may be a two sided instrument. On the one hand, decentralisation can be the result of a political and historical negotiation, restoring historic claims to nations or regions as a 'dimension in the political modernisation of society' (Neave. 1998) p. 271). In this framework, called 'compensatory legitimation' by Neave, the power of the state is compensated by the strength of the nations or regions.

On the other hand, a more pragmatic vision, related with economic renovation and 'a global strategy of social engineering' (Neave 1998 p. 272), could lead to a situation in which decentralisation means that the

state delegates degrees of control in intermediary bodies. For avoiding hidden centralised power, these intermediary bodies should combine the authority of the state representing the interests of the society and the influence of the higher education world.

For Yorke (1999), 0.1% of the money of the Higher Education Funding Council for England allocated for teaching quality assessment is too much, taking into account that only a negligible number of institutions in higher education showed unsatisfactory provision. But many of the quality assurance systems used in different countries have been shown to produce positive benefits, such as 'improvement in academic programmes, closer links with employers and professions, and increased confidence among key stakeholders' (Harman. 1998) p. 361).

CONCLUSION

In democratic countries where higher education receives public funds the requirement for external guarantees of academic standards is legitimate. Higher education systems need to maintain public confidence and states should adopt the responsibility of assuring that this confidence is not unfounded. Institutions, academics and students should assume the duty of preserving and improving the levels of quality in *producing* professionals. Social responsibility is not reduced to the accountability of public funds but is, above all, to benefit the society with the services of competent professionals.

Some studies are showing that most institutions have introduced quality system assurance in response to external circumstances (market and competition or shortage of funds) rather than because of an imposition from the state (Barblan. 1997); (Brennan & Shah. 2000). Academics have been accepting quality assessment when it is based in peer review and with more emphasis on improvement. In spite of this, the current tendency in the UK seems to turn quality assurance systems into mechanisms of accountability, rather than of progress and enhancement.

A number of recommendations have been made by different authors (Boyle & Bowden. 1997); (Harman. 1998); (Jackson. 1998); (Hall. 1996) in order to avoid the whole range of risks, but particularly the danger

of industrialisation. Among the most important of these recommendations is the alert of the menace in neglecting the institution contexts, missions and values.

State agencies and other stakeholders have not the capacity to define academic standards in isolation from the academic community because of their lack of expertise (Finch. 1997)). But the academic community has to work with experts in other fields and people representing other stakeholders; specifically important are those who represent social groups or interests. It is peremptory, thus, to create conceptual frameworks and the language which allow making room for the vast diversity of perspectives and interests (Jackson. 1998).

Other of the most desirable features for a quality assurance system is the emphasis on institutional and practical improvement and renewal rather than in accountability. In this way it could be assured that quality assessment is not an end in itself but an instrument to improve educational institutions. Furthermore, it is important to ensure that students receive the benefit of the best teaching, focusing on the continuous improvement in student learning, processes and achievements as central goals. The effects of this approach to quality assessment could be secondarily reflected in the accountability.

A wider, multi-faceted and integrated scheme of evaluation is necessary in order to reflect the different, complex and dynamic aspects of the organisations, educational environments, processes, interests, purposes and needs (Boyle & Bowden. 1997). These schemes should use congruent methodologies, follow transparent processes and have an acceptable cost effectiveness, as well as they should be based on the expert knowledge in the field.

Quality evaluation methodologies should incorporate elements of self evaluation, peer review and external reporting. The academic community is the prime responsible for providing high-quality experience of learning for students; thus, self and peer assessment are key aspects in a process that should be participative, if continuous improvement is a primary aim. A policy of staff development and allocation of resources should support the course to enable that quality enhancement is achieved.

Higher education and the current factors influencing it are dynamic. ‘Quality levels and the notion of quality improvement need to be conceived of in dynamic terms’ (Boyle & Bowden. 1997) p. 114). The

existence of current definitions of systems and instruments in different countries does not mean that further revisions should not be conducted. On the contrary, higher education and quality assurance systems could be able to respond to the future social changes and challenges, changing at that time themselves.

Finally, quality assessment has very good potentialities which should be fully exploited to improve higher education systems. Quality management and quality assessment can help to learn and share this learning, accept criticism and changes, recognize strengths and weakness and admit different interests. But they can only aid if we are open and aware of their purposes, effects and risks.

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