



Regulating higher education: Quality assurance and neo-liberal managerialism in higher education—A critical introduction

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Abstract

Quality assurance (QA) regimes have become an increasingly dominant regulatory tool in the management of higher education sectors around the world. By one estimate, nearly half the countries in the world now have quality assurance systems or QA regulatory bodies for higher education. This paper explores the emergence and spread of QA regimes, the coalescence of regulatory logics around qualifications frameworks, and the broad confluence of such approaches in terms of their impact on the historically contested relationship between the state and university. By focusing on the interlocking regulatory logics provided by QA, the article explores how such approaches impose quasi-market, competitive based rationalities premised on neo-liberal managerialism using a policy discourse that is often informed by conviction rather than evidence.

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1. Introduction

As John Stoddart, the former Chairman of the UK Higher Education Quality Council, observed, ‘evaluation, assessment and assurance of academic quality is intrinsic to higher education’ (Brown, 2004, p. x). Indeed it is. Historically it has comprised the *raison d’être* of an academy in search of truth through the application of reason, objective method and the discovery of knowledge – a process built upon peer review, rigorous impartial assessment, critique and a perennial preoccupation with interrogating ideas and epistemologies of knowledge. The embodiment of these traditions and the lofty philosophical pursuit of placing knowledge in the service of humankind lie at the very heart of the idea of the university. Any reading of the history of the modern university, for example, not only celebrates the triumph of reason over theism, creed and dogma but elevates the notion of academic freedom and self-governance as principles central to the operation of university life – ideas that have been enshrined since 1158 when the University of Bologna adopted an academic charter, the *Constitutio Habita*² – centred on the principle of academic freedom – and

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² Malagola, C. (1888), *Statuti delle Università e dei Collegi dello Studio Bolognese*. Bologna: Zanichelli.

which was reaffirmed in 1988 when 430 university rectors from around the world signed the *Magna Charta Universitatum*³ to mark the 900th anniversary of the founding of the University (see also [Ridder-Symoens, 1996](#)).

For much of its long history, the university has thus been a place fortified by its problematic relationship to the state; an institutional space for heterodoxy and exploration reflecting hard fought, fiercely guarded academic freedoms. As the eminent philosopher Michael Oakeshott observed, the university is a conversation where quality is reflected in ‘the voices which speak’ and its value measured in the ‘relics it leaves behind in the minds of those who participate’ ([Oakeshott & Fuller, 1989](#)). The university and the ‘conversation’ over ideas, in other words, produced its own assurance of quality, its own standards, measures and assessments rendered through networks of academic peers.

The last 25 years or so in the history of the university is thus as profound as it is perhaps disturbing. Indeed, it represents as big a puzzle in policy debates of any puzzle there is; how an institution a thousand years in the making and steeped in creeds of self-evaluation can be so effectively usurped in the space of a few short decades? ([Maassen & Stensaker, 2011](#)). As John Stoddart so astutely observed, the question is not ‘whether higher education should be subject to evaluation and assessment,’ it always has been, but rather ‘who should do it’? ([Brown, 2004](#), p. x).

While, historically, universities and academics have exercised this authority and determination, increasingly, of course, this is no longer the case (see [Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014](#)). The rise of the ‘evaluative’ and ‘regulatory’ state and the implementation of what have variously been depicted as new public management (NPM) tools have become an increasingly ubiquitous mode of governance applied equally to the higher education sector ([Christensen & Laegreid, 2010](#); [Dill, 1998](#); [Levi-Faur, 2005](#)). Like numerous other sectors (electricity, water, sanitation, telecommunications, roads, rail, ports and airports, finance and health – among others), higher education too has become progressively subject to regulation by agencies who ‘undertake the classic regulatory functions of setting standards, monitoring activities, and applying enforcement to secure behaviour modification where this is required’ ([King, 2007](#), p. 413; see also [Carroll, 2014](#)) Unlike other sectors, however, the sheer scale of governance by regulation, especially through specific instrumentalities like quality assurance regimes, has been remarkable in its geographic reach ([Christensen & Laegreid, 2010](#); [Dill, 1998](#); [Levi-Faur, 2005](#)). By one count, for example, nearly half the countries in the world now have quality assurance systems or QA regulatory bodies for higher education ([Martin, 2007](#); see also Jarvis, this issue).

The rise of what Roger King terms the ‘higher education regulatory state’ is more than simply a governance innovation, however (2007). Governance through regulation is not a politically benign instrument, nor simply a technicised mode of administrative procedures. *Governmentality*, as Foucault reminds us, is equally a mechanism of political power, a projection of interests and an attempt to control ([Foucault, 2007](#)). In the contemporary university we can observe this in neo-liberal managerial practices situated around ‘performance based evaluation and efforts to frame, regulate and optimise academic life’ ([Morrissey, 2013](#), p. 799). Research assessment exercises, assessments of academic output quality (esteem, grant revenues generated, consultancies awarded and research ‘impact’), the intensity of research productivity, teaching quality and other performance metrics increasingly define tenure, promotion and career trajectories. Regulation of the higher education sector is thus equally a politics of surveillance where quality assurance serves as an instrument of accreditation and a mechanism to prise compliance (see also [Engebretsen, Heggen, & Eilertsen, 2012](#); [Lucas, 2014](#)). While we need not invoke the images of Bentham’s and Foucault’s panopticon or suggest that governmentality represents singular power structures with grand designs, the emergence of normative and now dominant regulatory instruments situated around reporting, transparency, accountability, performance and audit cultures, and the increasing subjugation of the academy to regimes of assessment based on metrics that are driven by quasi-market like competition, act increasingly as a means for regimenting academic and institutional compliance ([Deem & Brehony, 2005](#), pp. 219–220; see also [Worthington & Hodgson, 2005](#)).

In the contemporary era, the university thus sits oddly amid two narratives; one that prizes academic freedom, independence of thought and expression, heterodoxy and exploration to create new knowledge frontiers, on the other hand, an increasingly intrusive series of regulatory regimes that seek to manage, steer and control the sector in ways that serve the interests of the state and the economy by applying specific ideational motifs about efficiency, value, performance, and thus the economic worth of the university to the economy ([Rosa, Stensaker, & Westerheijden, 2007](#), p. 1).

³ <http://www2.unibo.it/avl/charta/charta.htm>

It is these themes that this issue of *Policy and Society* explores; the policy diffusion, adoption, and implementation of quality assurance (QA) regimes in the higher education sector globally, focusing specifically on the utilization of quality assurance as an instrument of regulatory control – and the implications of this for the higher education sector, academic freedom, scholarship, quality – and related issues.

2. Quality assurance as a regulatory instrument: the state, the market and the university

Quality assurance as a specific foci of regulation in the higher education sector originated in the late 19th century when the first accreditation organizations emerged in the United States (US). Strangely, however, as Rosa et al. (2007, p. 2) observe, they remained boutique and the exception in approaches to quality and accreditation. Only with the transition from elite to mass education, in part prompted by the Johnson Administration's Higher Education Act of 1965 and the injection of substantial federal budget support for universities, scholarships and student loans was interest in quality and accreditation rekindled (see also Skolnik, 2010, p. 75). Simultaneously, developments in Western Europe, Australia, Canada and New Zealand with the rapid expansion of the higher education sector also witnessed increased discussion about quality assurance. The establishment of new 'brown brick' universities throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, for example, raised questions of programmatic, teaching, research and graduate quality, along with practical issues about the appropriate mechanisms for student, research and university funding amid sector enlargement (Cloete et al., 2006; Dill & Beerkens, 2010; Shah, Nair, & Wilson, 2011; Smith, Boccock, Scott, & Baston, 2002).

From the late 1960s through the 1980s these issues were essentially internalized within government and managed through traditional bureaucratic arrangements, albeit with increasing pressures for greater university accountability, transparency and sector efficiency prompted by the election of conservative governments in various Anglo-Saxon countries in the late 1970s (Maassen, Moen, & Stensaker, 2011, p. 480). The notable break with traditional oversight mechanisms occurred in the United Kingdom with the publication in 1991 of the Government White Paper, *Higher Education: A New Framework*, which proposed not only the abolition of the binary division between universities and polytechnics (allowing the later to assume a university title) but the establishment of a new quality assurance agency (Higher Educational Quality Council – HEQC) (Brown, 2004, pp. 1–2; see also Flynn, 2002, pp. 79–87).

These pioneering reforms in the UK's higher education sector began what has subsequently become a global trend – indeed one that continues to gain momentum – with four interrelated factors prompting the emulation of similar policy and regulatory practices. First, the spread of NPM governance practices amid a global context of 'reduced governmental scope and size' and declining state fiscal capacities but where expectations about participation in higher education have continued to rise (King, 2009, pp. 40–51). Second, the declining effectiveness of traditional bureaucratic governance systems as a result of rapid sector expansion and increasing systemic complexity with the emergence of a more complex education supply chain comprised of both public and private service providers. Third, growth in the strategic importance of the sector to national economic development, economic innovation, wealth and value creation as a result of the intensification of knowledge based competition between economies.⁴ And fourth, greater student mobility and the emergence of an international market for higher education, coupled with intensifying competition for academic talent, resources and research funding, has precipitated a dynamic competitive environment beyond national borders via global rankings, league tables and international benchmarking, demanding commensurate national policy responses in order to sustain sector competitiveness (King, 2009, pp. 40–51) (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, pp. 36–40).

Collectively, these factors have focused attention on sector governance innovations principally through the introduction of regulatory quality assurance regimes. Quality assurance, as Harvey and Newton (2007) note, has become a near ubiquitous policy tool; championed as both an approach to management through total quality management practices (TQM), embraced as both an obvious, if not obligatory, organizational objective and seen as a yardstick of appraisal in terms of 'spend' versus 'return' (Lewis & Smith, 1994; Stensaker, 2007, pp. 99–101). For governments, the utility of 'quality' as a policy tool is thus obvious:

⁴ The legislation establishing the HECQ was enacted in 1992 with the HEQC conducting its first quality audits in 1993. Subsequently, the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency for higher Education (QAA) came into existence in March 1997, combining the audit functions of the HEQC with the higher education funding councils of Wales, England and Scotland into one organization (see Brown, 2004, pp. 1–2, and Appendix 2).

Quality assurance of higher education is ubiquitous because it provides a means for governments to check higher education. . . [Quality assurance underpins] processes of delegated authority in systems as diverse as market arrangements in the United States, autonomous public systems in the United Kingdom, previously ministerial-controlled systems in Scandinavia and tightly constrained systems such as China. The beauty of this approach, from the governments point of view, is that quality assurance ensures not only accountability but can be used to encourage a degree of compliance to policy requirements or to control a burgeoning private sector (Harvey & Newton, 2007, p. 225).

This is not to suggest policy convergence around a ubiquitous ‘quality assurance’ model. Diversity still predominates with the sector strongly influenced by historical path dependencies, institutional legacies and cross national variation – in part reflecting specific national state–university relationships and their political and historical contexts (see also Bernhard, 2012; Billing, 2004; Deem, 2010; Frank, Kurth, & Mironowicz, 2012; Yat Wai Lo, 2014). Countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden, for example, have used national evaluations through audits in order to assess institutional quality and impact in areas such as research, teaching, and organizational performance. Similarly, France (French Evaluation Agency for Research and Higher Education), Germany (Research Rating), the Netherlands (Dutch Association of Universities – VSNU), and Italy (National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research System) have used various instruments for assessing quality ranging from audits, benchmarking, peer review, qualitative and quantitative indicators, measurement against performance indicators, as well as surveys of students, graduates and employers – among others (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Rowlands, 2012, p. 100).

Approaches to the assessment and measurement of quality are thus multifarious, with no single ‘quality assurance concept’ in evidence due to the ‘magnitude of existing systems, routines, and templates borrowing the quality label’ (Stensaker, 2007, p. 100). Indeed, cross national variation in the mode of the quality assurance regime adopted itself reflects deeper on-going contestation over the relationship between the state and university, including issues of autonomy, governance and academic freedom – if not the role and purpose of the university itself. As Rosa, Stensaker and Westerheijden note, ‘the quality debate is not just to further the traditional understanding of quality as excellence, but simultaneously as “fitness for purpose”, the new purpose being to make higher education institutions more responsive to societal demands for graduates with readily usable knowledge and skills in the job market’ (Rosa et al., 2007, p. 1).

As a broad tome of regulatory tools and ‘fitness for purpose’ measures, quality assurance has been the principle instrument of governments keen to reorient the university (both in terms of resource allocation and organizational efforts) to the pursuit of what Slaughter and Leslie (1997, p. 39) characterize as ‘technoscience’ (the broad array of technological, scientific and applied research activities that can translate knowledge innovations into commodified-commercial outcomes) and thus increase the national share of world markets. Indeed, market demand and the veneration of the ‘utility’ of teaching and research related to the needs of the economy, have themselves become indicators that are embedded within quality assurance processes in the form of employer surveys about graduate attributes, or national audits assessing the needs of the economy – and how adequately universities are meeting these. Structural reorientations in the focus and activities of universities have thus often been at the heart of the quality debate, with governments keen to realize the economic impact of a university sector focused on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and less so on liberal arts, humanities, or traditions of scholarship and teaching that are seen as non-contributory to the skill pool required by the economy.

One of the primary policy objectives of most governments has thus been ‘to turn the university into an organizational actor that will develop a more entrepreneurial and unique identity’ (Maassen et al., 2011, p. 480). This involves the adoption of ‘more formalized organizational structures, emphasizing the importance of leadership, a more hierarchical internal governance structure, and comprehensive processes and administrative structures for evaluating performance’ (Frølich, Stensaker, Huisman, Bótas, & Slipersäter, 2013, p. 79). At the same time, evaluative labels like ‘performance,’ ‘efficiency’ and ‘impact’ have been increasingly utilized as instruments for (re)allocating resources, assessing the contributors/worth of new and existing teaching programmes, or the likely returns on research. As an instrument of governance, quality assurance ‘gives power to some and removes it from others’ while facilitating ‘an increase in control by central authorities over desired “outcomes/ends” through deregulated “processes/means”’ (Rowlands, 2012, p. 100). Far from simply a managerial tool, the history of quality assurance has been inextricably political; used as much to engineer sector and organizational change associated with specific political agendas as it has the pursuit of excellence (Westerheijden, Stensaker, Rosa, & Corbett, 2014, p. 10).

Similar trends in the market instrumentalization of programmes, teaching and research can also be found in the increasing dominance of quality assurance tools which lie outside of the academy and government mandated programme quality assessments (Dill, 1998, p. 366). These reside in league tables and reputational rankings, a large part of the weighting for which rests on external assessments (often employer or industry based) of the suitability and quality of graduate skills for the workplace. These are typically supplemented with a variety of proxy indicators to gauge the instrumental worth of specific programmes of study or universities, including job placement rates, average starting salaries of graduates and career progression prospects three, five and ten years out from graduation in terms of alumni achievements. League tables produced by *The Times*, *US News and World Report*, *Maclean's University Rankings* (Canada), and *QS Worldwide University Rankings*, for example, represent what Dill (1998) (Dill & Beerkens, 2010, p. 344) characterizes as secondary quality information markets that utilize a variety of predominantly market based indicators to rank universities and programmes so that consumers can understand the market worth of a degree (see also King, 2009, pp. 135–165). In specific sectors such as business schools and MBA programmes, these commercial/reputational rankings and associated metrics produce intense organizational pressures focused on graduate outcomes, embedding market based forms of competition between MBA providers who offer lucrative programmes typically priced on a cost plus basis (see Pusser & Marginson, 2013).

The emergence of quality assurance regimes have thus to be seen as the result of both ideational changes in public perceptions about the role of the university and 'fitness for purpose' in training graduates for the workforce, and, at the same time, the outcome of a series of policy instruments designed to induce 'academic capitalism' and redirect the allocation of institutional resources to income generating activities (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 74). The marketization or application of economic rationalism to programme offerings, research funding, hiring practices and tenure decisions, for example, increasingly reflects the imputation of ideas that venerate 'for profit academic activity,' where the utilization of quasi-market mechanisms in the allocation of university resources becomes a singular lens through which specific forms of academic activity are valued and others marginalized – or defunded (Dill, 1998). Governance through regulation and the embedding of regimes of quality assurance in Foucauldian terms thus represents the logical realization of governmentality; indeed the increasing triumph of the state in subjugating the university to instrumental market forces and economic interests.

3. Regulation and quality assurance regimes – emerging commonalities?

Despite continuing cross national variation in the composition and operating modalities of the higher education sector there are discernible trends in regulatory approaches to quality assurance. As Hood (1983) observed, the regulatory problem in essence confines itself to four solutions or tools available to government: (i) the allocation of economic/financial resources, including the use of market based regulation in the allocation of resources, (ii) the use of laws, regulations and ordinances, including compliance, reporting and audit requirements, (iii) the organization of the sector, including sector density, barriers to entry and the stipulation of operating requirements, (iv) and the use of signals and information to effect sector outcomes and change behaviours, including requirements concerning disclosure laws and information to consumers. These tools, of course, are not exclusive and often used simultaneously in pursuit of interlocking objectives and regulatory logics: greater sector efficiencies, enhancing competition, instilling sector responsiveness to consumer demands, and changing organizational behaviour in the allocation of resources and organizational effort.

As Dill and Beerkens (2010) find in their survey of quality assurance policy instruments in various jurisdictions, the dominant trend in the regulation of quality reflects the reassertion of the state and direct regulatory oversight (see Table 1). Professional (self) regulation and pure market based regulation premised on institutional competition for resources tend to be supplementary policy tools as opposed to dominant regulatory approaches. Further, as they also suggest, approaches to the regulation of quality assurance are increasingly coalescing around the use of Qualifications Frameworks (QF), in which skill attainment, learning outcomes, programme and course content, course and programme requirements, and metrics of academic credit (educational attainment) are progressively standardized as part of a national or regional QF.⁵ Studies by the International Labour Organization (ILO) tend to confirm this. As Christine Evans-Klock observes:

⁵ While the terminology 'qualifications framework' is commonly used, similar nomenclatures invoke 'competency based training,' 'outcomes based learning' or 'outcomes based education' (see, for example, Allais, 2010).

Table 1
Policy instruments for quality assurance in higher education^a.

Direct state regulation ^b	Professional self-regulation	Market regulation
Australian Qualifications Framework	External Examining (UK)	CHE-Ranking (Germany)
Academic Audit and Qualifications Framework (Hong Kong)	Teacher Education Accreditation Council (UK)	National Survey of Student Engagement (USA)
Subject Benchmarking (UK)		Course Experience Questionnaire and Graduate Destination Survey (Australia)
Subject Assessments (Denmark)		
Subject Accreditation (Germany)		
General Medical Council Accreditation (UK)		
Performance-based Contracting (Catalonia, Spain)		
National report Card on Higher Education (USA)		
National Assessment of Courses; National Framework of Qualifications (Brazil)		
Qualifications and Credit Framework (UK)		
New Zealand Qualifications Framework		
National Qualifications Framework (South Africa)		
European Qualifications Framework		
Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework		
Malaysian Qualifications Framework		

^a Adapted from [Dill and Beerkens \(2010\)](#), p. 343.

^b In addition to these countries, Ireland, Maldives, Mauritius, Mexico, Singapore, Philippines, Trinidad and Tobago have also implemented qualifications frameworks, while Albania, Angola, Barbados, Chile, China, Columbia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Jamaica, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Lesotho, Macedonia, Malawi, Mozambique, Uzbekistan, Tanzania, Turkey, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, the Pacific Islands, the Southern African Development Community, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have commenced the process of constructing qualifications frameworks or are at various stages of their implementation ([Tuck, 2007](#), p. 1).

The development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) has been a major international trend in reforming national education and training systems since the late 1990s. This initiative first started, and was diffused mostly, among English-speaking developed countries. However, since the late 1990s such frameworks have also been adopted by non-English speaking and developing countries' (Preface in [Tuck, 2007](#), p. iii).

The extent of this trend is telling. The UNESCO Institute for Life Long Learning, for example, estimates that 'regional, transnational and national qualifications frameworks' now involve 143 countries ([UNESCO, 2013](#)). Qualification Frameworks, in other words, are increasingly used as the meta-policy architecture for regulating the higher education sector and quality assurance.

Qualifications frameworks have a series of instrumental regulatory logics, including; bringing the provision of 'education and training within a single system'; establishing a common set of reference points, standards and benchmarks that can measure change and progress in terms of sector objectives and outcomes; defining a framework that supports sector reforms and restructuring; standards setting in which levels of learning and learning outcomes are aligned with specific qualifications; and defining operational parameters for the assurance of quality, including the validation of qualifications or standards, accreditation and audit of education and training institutions, and the quality assurance of assessment leading to the award of qualifications ([Tuck, 2007](#), pp. v–vii).

In characterizing their role and functions, Tuck defines QFs as thus:

A Qualifications Framework is an instrument for the development, classification and recognition of skills, knowledge and competencies along a continuum of agreed levels. It is a way of structuring existing and new qualifications, which are defined by learning outcomes, i.e. clear statements of what the learner must know or be able to do. . . The Qualifications Framework indicates the comparability of different qualifications and how one can progress from one level to another, within and across occupations or industrial sectors (and even across vocational and academic fields if the NQF is designed to include both vocational and academic qualifications in a single framework) (2007, p. v).

Tuck's characterization, which offers a generally accepted definition of QFs, typifies the instrumental logic behind their adoption and of a broader ideational project that aligns education with 'training,' the role of the university in the context of skills/knowledge outcomes related to/required by the economy, and quality assurance in the context of programme and institutional 'fitness for purpose' in terms of these objectives.

Similarly, broader based regional QF architectures have sought to complement these objectives. The Bologna Process, for example, which commenced in 1999 and now includes 45 countries (including 25 European Union members states), requires participating countries to develop a national QF while the Bologna Framework for the European Higher Education Area provides 'a mechanism to relate national frameworks to each other' in terms of three principles: (i) *international transparency* to facilitate comprehension and comparability of qualifications across borders; (ii) *international recognition of qualifications* through a 'framework which provides a common understanding of the outcomes represented by qualifications; (iii) *international mobility of learners and graduates* through facilitating recognition of prior learning and qualifications gained ("Bologna Framework, 2014," p. 1).

Subsequently, similar parallel policy architectures emerged with the establishment of the [European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education \(ENQA\)](#) in 2000, providing a regional level body designed to drive 'the development of quality assurance across all the Bologna signatory countries' (ENQA; [Gornitzka, 2010](#)). This was extended with the development of the 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (ESG) which acts as a coordinating body working with national level quality assurance agencies, while in 2008 the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) introduced a further regional level architecture designed to act 'as a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning' (EQF).⁶ Finally, the founding of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) in March, 2008, formalized an institutional mechanism for recognizing 'reliable and trustworthy quality assurance agencies operating in Europe.' The EQAR, in effect, acts as a register of quality assurance agencies and requires 'substantial compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) before agencies can be admitted into the register' (ENQA, 2007, p. 6; [Maassen & Stensaker, 2011](#)).

While it is premature to proclaim the emergence of a *supranational* quality assurance regime, the increasing coalescence of governance approaches around QFs suggests an emergent norm in regulatory approaches towards quality assurance – albeit not an *exclusive* approach, with other regulatory tools being used to supplement control regimes ([Dill & Beerkens, 2013](#); [Ferne & Pilcher, 2009](#); [Harvey & Williams, 2010](#), p. 10). What is discernible, however, is the emergence of a cascading, multi-level governance regime for QFs and quality assurance in Europe; a process that is creating self-reinforcing, complex polycentric regulatory systems which may in fact be usurping national regulatory autonomy – or at least limiting national level policy choices in governance approaches to the regulation of quality in higher education (see [Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014](#)).⁷ Importantly, European practices and policy approaches, not least because of their spatial scope, are increasingly becoming the de facto regulatory benchmark, in a sense setting the regulatory standards which other jurisdictions look to for best practice – propagating policy transfer and emulation of QFs as part of a broader QA regulatory regime (see Jarvis, this issue).

4. Quality assurance and quality outcomes: where is the evidence?

The rise of quality assurance and the near ubiquity of its embedding in the regulation of higher education across a vast array of countries and regions is a project that appears only to be deepening. Indeed, the thickening networks of

⁶ A further quality assurance body, the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training ([EQAVET](#)) has also emerged, tasked with assisting EU member states and the European Commission in the implementation of the *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework* and the European Commission's *Education and Training 2020 Strategy* ([EQAVET](#)).

⁷ While each of these regional level organizations and processes have stressed the diversity of national education cultures and that EU member states have responsibility for their own education systems, agendas associated with 'coordination,' 'standardization,' the propagation of 'best practices' and attempts to build equivalence and translation across national QFs/educational systems also betrays tensions amid the rise of supranational governance regimes. The mission statement of the ENQA, for example, is at pains to stress national diversity and respect for national autonomy in approaches to the regulation of quality assurance, noting: 'ENQA respects the **diversity** [original emphasis] of European higher education a major cultural heritage and strength of the emerging European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the diversity of quality assurance and enhancement approaches and measures and the diversity of approaches to setting-up national quality assurance systems' (mission statement of the ENQA).

agencies, oversight bodies and organizations tasked with national, regional and global consultation, coordination and the propagation of quality assurance are enjoying both increasing institutional depth and self-reverential professionalization:

The higher education “quality assurance” empire has grown strongly over the last 20 years. Governments legislate for higher education “quality” and establish public agencies; national qualifications frameworks proliferate; organisations such as the World Bank and UNESCO offer policy prescriptions and funding; global and regional networks, such as INQAAHE [International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education] and ENQA, multiply, and agency staff assert that they belong to a “profession (Blackmur, 2010, p. 67).

After almost a quarter of a century, massive effort, the expenditure of substantial resources and the involvement of legions of academics and administrators in the quality assurance project, the impact, outcomes and ‘quality quantum’ associated with this regulatory approach should be both manifest and tangible. It is not unreasonable to ask, then, what benefits have resulted? What additional quality has been added above and beyond normal academic practices associated with the professional enhancement of teaching and research? Precisely what improvements and value additions has quality assurance delivered? More obviously, what has been the return (or yield) on the investment in quality assurance? Has the quality assurance ‘spend’ been worth the outcomes produced?

In any other realm, the adoption of wide reaching policy regimes that download substantial compliance, audit and administrative costs to institutional/economic actors would typically be subject to evidenced based evaluation, weighing costs against outcomes/benefits. Indeed, the recurrent mantra of neo-liberalism has been to ‘get the state out of the way,’ reduce costs, red-tape and regulatory burdens in order to enhance economic activity, innovation and wealth creation. The OECD, for example, as part of its ongoing engagement with governments around the world, suggests the use of ‘regulatory impact assessments,’ check lists to encourage regulatory reform and ‘deregulation,’ and periodic efforts of ‘sunsetting’ inefficient or ineffective regulatory regimes, recommending that governments utilize ‘performance measurement instruments’ to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of existing regulations (see also Cammack, 2006; Carroll, 2014; OECD, 2005, p. 16).

Strangely, but perhaps not surprisingly, public agencies, scholars and governments have generally not applied these same rationalities to the education sector (Blackmur, 2010, p. 68). As a policy discourse, QA has occupied a near unassailable ‘moral’ framing, ensconcing its ‘legitimacy’ as a ‘preferred,’ ‘necessary’ and ‘effective’ policy instrument in the context of the new, global-knowledge economy. Indeed, the framing of the QA policy framework has been its greatest triumph:

The primary role of quality assurance in higher education is to create a culture of continuous organisational and professional *self-development* and *self-regulation* that will provide a better value-for-money service that is compatible with the needs of the global (post)modern *knowledge* economy and *learning* society (Worthington & Hodgson, 2005, p. 98).

Terms such as ‘improvement,’ ‘development’ and ‘enhancement,’ as Louise Morley observes, ‘invest quality with a morality that is hard to resist.’ Critics run the risk of being labelled as conservatives and antithetical to ‘enhancement,’ ‘development’ and ‘improvement’ or as reactionaries attempting to ‘preserve an outdated intellectual value-system that is incongruous to the needs of... consumers and the new knowledge economy’ (as quoted in Worthington & Hodgson, 2005, p. 98). Formative policy evaluation, cost-benefit analysis or critical assessments that might question the worth and value-add of QA regimes have thus been politically dangerous places to occupy – not to mention difficult research projects to secure funding for in an environment otherwise disposed to deepening QA regimes.

Yet an exclusive reading of QA as a state-directed neo-liberal programme to re-focus the university on ‘technoscience’ in order to valorize the sector and the competitive positioning of the state, overly simplifies the complex interlocking series of forces at work in the sector – at both the systemic and institutional level.⁸ Neo-liberalism has not, as is often suggested, diminished ‘rule regimes’ by getting government ‘out of the way’ so much as

⁸ Valorize or valorization is used in the Marxist sense of the ‘valorization of capital’ – denoting the realization of value through the incorporation of labour into production. Karl Marx used the term in *Capital* in essence to signify the ability to monetize a specific activity and realize more value than existed before (see Marx, 2011, pp. 168–178).

set in place logics that transform the ‘institutional frameworks within which regulatory... development unfolds’ (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010, p. 339). The political, regulatory and economic terrains in which universities operate have thus been equally as powerful in prompting universities *themselves* to adopt market-disciplinary based solutions to reforming organizational cultures and encouraging broader sector-wide re-structuring. The often enthusiastic adoption of QA regimes by universities, for example, highlights a logical response to cascading market rationality, where higher education providers seek not only to assuage consumers of the ‘value-for-money’ in the degree products they offer but increasingly to protect reputations, market share, positioning and product differentiation. As Brenner et al. (2010) note, the logic of cascading neo-liberalism sets in place endogenously derived ‘pathways of regulatory restructuring’ that tend to reinforce specific regulatory approaches that are often self-reinforcing.

One recent example of cascading market rationality as a regulatory pathway to the establishment of a QA regime is exemplified in the Australian higher education context. Until 2011, Australia had no overarching regulatory body charged with QA in higher education. Rather, a series of discrete initiatives by successive governments since the 1970s including legislation, federal-state cooperative measures, self-initiatives by higher education service providers and a broader set of sector reforms saw a loosely constituted series of quality assurance measures operate in the sector (Mikol, ND; Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Shah et al., 2011). In 2011, federal legislation brought into existence Australia’s first sector wide higher education quality assurance regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency – TEQSA.

The establishment of TEQSA reflects a series of inter-locking market rationalities set against the increasing economic importance of the sector to the Australian economy, with regulatory oversight justified on the grounds of ensuring sector sustainability, reputational and market protection. As the founding legislation states: TEQSA’s mission is ‘to protect and enhance Australia’s reputation for and international competitiveness in higher education’ (TEQSA, 2014).

Rather than being resisted or seen as an encroachment on institutional autonomy, universities welcomed the establishment of TEQSA; in part because it met the need for a central administrative agency charged with coordination and management of the sector’s interests in terms of market and reputational protection, in part because it provided formal recognition of the strategic importance of the sector to Australia’s economy. As the ‘Group of Eight’ (the name given to Australia’s eight leading, research intensive universities) noted in a recent publication, higher education in Australia attracts 7% of the world’s international students (some 300,000 in 2014), the third most popular destination behind the United States and United Kingdom, generates international fee income of AUD\$15 billion annually and supports 107,000 jobs. It is Australia’s fourth largest export sector behind iron ore, coal and gold and adds significant spill-over benefits to the economy through indirect international student spending (accommodation, consumption, tourism) as well as providing a key source of high-skilled migration helping address national skill shortages (GOE, 2014).

Rather than an externally imposed neo-liberal policy agenda, the establishment of TEQSA was driven as much by universities concerned about sector sustainability, the relative positioning of the Australian higher education market in terms of competitor economies and protecting international fee income that has become a major source of university revenues. Indeed, the TEQSA itself understands this to be its key regulatory role, casting itself as a ‘next generation’ regulator proactively engaged in sustainability and reputational enhancement. While the language of quality assurance is reflected in regulatory tools focused on ‘standards,’ ‘thresholds’ and ‘excellence’ TEQSA’s regulatory logic rests in its fiduciary responsibility for the sector, the management of potential risks and over all sector positioning in what it identifies as a ‘demand-driven environment’ (see also Baird, 2013; TEQSA, 2014). Indeed, TEQSA’s adoption of risk based regulation underscores the reputational/market protection logic of its operating remit. As the TEQSA notes, its ‘regulatory risk framework’ scans sector participants, placing them into categories. Established operators with long and successful track records, international reputations and evidenced based achievements in research and teaching excellence essentially receive ‘light touch’ regulation, reducing compliance burdens and the need to engage in institutional audits/requirements to demonstrate quality assurance processes. Rather, the substantial efforts and focus of TEQSA is on the fringes and institutional actors whose operations may pose risk to the sector and overall reputational impact. As the TEQSA notes:

Regulatory risk enables TEQSA to identify and understand risk to quality higher education, at both a provider and sector level, and informs decisions about where to focus and prioritise TEQSA’s regulatory activity in

response. . . The Regulatory Risk Framework identifies categories of risk in line with the Threshold Standards. . . Three overarching ‘priority risk consequence areas’ guide an overall judgement about levels of risk: risk to students; risk of provider collapse; and risk to sector reputation (TEQSA, 2012).

Under these regulatory logics, the sense in which the value-additions of QA regimes might be directly measured or costed becomes redundant. It is the value and sustainability of the sector which underscores the logic and creates cascading market-rational interests among sector participants. QA regimes become not just co-extensive with the sublimation of the higher education sector within the logic of the market and economy, but market building tools: a market signalling mechanism to enhance product differentiation in an otherwise crowded higher education market place; a regulatory mechanism for sector management as a means of protecting and enhancing market share.

These findings concur with recent studies by Westerheijden et al., who note that ‘the development of higher education policy, exemplified. . . by quality assurance policies. . . derive from different motivations’ and the ‘different logics underlying it’ (Westerheijden et al., 2014, p. 10). These encompass political, ideological, bargaining and the ‘muddling through’ logics of political-bureaucratic management as well as the interests of sector participants who see regulation and the use of QA instruments as enhancing their strategic positioning.

5. Conclusion

QA regimes continue to spread and occupy a central place in governance approaches to the regulation of higher education around the world. As this paper has attempted to demonstrate, however, QA regimes are not benign managerial instruments – they must also be understood as part of a broader series of agendas associated with neo-liberal policy prescriptions that valorize market rationality. Of itself, this is not a new observation. It is, however, not an observation that is frequently made and typically not in the context of university administrators who, in adopting such practices and ideational approaches to the management of research, teaching and funding activities are transforming university operating environments. The sense in which these practices enhance quality in terms of standards of academic excellence, scholastic rigour or the academic achievements of students and their learning, however, is typically a matter of conviction rather than evidenced based policy determination. As Harvey and Lee observe:

There is little theorising of quality in higher education. Worldwide, the preponderant approach to external quality evaluation is pragmatic, often working backwards from the political presumption, driven by new public management ideology, that higher education needs to be checked if it is to be accountable. In some cases, the method is determined before the purpose. Self-assessment and performance indicators, peer review and public reporting, although not a universal method, have become the norm and this approach is applied irrespective of the purpose, rationale, object and focus of external evaluation. Phrases such as ‘fitness for purpose’, ‘fitness of purpose’, ‘value for money’, ‘achieving excellence’ are linked to quality in higher education, all purporting, in some way or another, to be definitions of a concept that, deep down, there appears to be a reluctance to define at all. Such definitions are without any solid theoretical framework. Quality as fitness for purpose, for example, is not a definition and lacks any theoretical or conceptual gravitas. Fitness for purpose, even if linked to a fitness of purpose, thus implying a non-trivial purpose, still fails to evoke the core concept of the concept of quality (Harvey & Newton, 2007, p. 232).

While these observations might appear anomalous in the context of institutions such as universities which have a long history of evidenced based investigation and venerate rational, empirically based epistemologies, they signal on-going contestation between the state and university and the question of what universities do, what knowledge they produce and for whom. As ever, the quality debate remains principally a debate over values, politics and ideology.

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