Defining and Determining Quality in HE:

Potential Conflicts and their Effects

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In a recent discussion instigated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in order to consider doctoral education for the 21st century, the authors noted when proposing a somewhat dramatic rethinking of doctoral education in the United States that

> [A]s so many observers of U.S. doctoral education have opined, there are powerful forces built into the system of faculty rewards and institutional funding that work against the integrative model of scholarly formation and stewardship presented here. … the changes most needed entail not simply a new practice here and there, but deeper cultural transformations (Walker & Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching., 2008, p. 143).

The thesis proposed in this paper is that there are indeed a multitude of powerful forces of various types acting from all directions so as to affect the nature and quality of work at every level in higher education (HE) systems. These forces stem both from within and outside the university, and they are normally well-intentioned, generally recognised and often powerful. Some of them work in concert and reinforce each other, while others may have partially contradictory effects and cause a conflict of interests. In any case, their presence and effects must be thoroughly noted and understood; otherwise, it will be difficult to sustain various aspects of quality in academic work, and innovative practices may have little chance of survival.

We must stress that we are definitely not claiming everything to be well in higher education, nor that particular forces of change are subversive to the status quo and will lead to lower quality. On the contrary, we expect a number of agents to improve various operational aspects of higher education. The problem we perceive is that they will be unable to succeed if the effort is not holistic, in the spirit of the above quotation.

Whether within Europe or elsewhere throughout the world, the system of higher education is developing rapidly; it is both expanding and evolving (Jónasson, 2008). Moreover, the systems are changing both in quantitative ways, i.e. in the shear number of students and institutions (Schofer & Meyer, 2005; Windolf, 1998), and qualitative ways, i.e. by changes in the institutions themselves (Jóhannsdóttir, 2006; Jónasson, 2004b, 2006; Neave, 1979, 1983; Trow, 1972). Among the crucial issues is how to ensure that quality will result from these processes. Given the general agreement on HE's importance for the well-being and development of modern societies, endeavouring to maintain high quality in the fields of teaching and learning is of course crucial. This may however be easier said than done, given the considerable quantitative expansion (at least in relative terms) and more importantly the qualitative transformation of higher education and the influence of various, rather strong forces affecting HE systems. In this paper we will argue that the issue of quality has many facets, and partly due to that but even more to various strong, dynamic system forces, maintaining genuine quality may prove to be a very difficult task.

Thus we must open the question of quality, both the quality of teaching and the quality of learning. Sometimes these are seen as entities that can to some extent be discussed independently of other important fields. In our opinion this is not the case, but even if it were,

the field of quality has numerous threads that interact in manifold ways. Our main point is that quality can certainly be defined from a wide array of perspectives (Newton, 2007). These may vary according to role, i.e. whether we adopt the perspective of government, the institution or the academic parties participating (faculty and students), or whether we consider the education provided by the HE edifice to be a public or a private good, i.e. something beneficial to society at large or to the individual who will reap the benefits of her or his education. Below, we will speculate on how these perspectives may be influenced, perhaps quite dramatically, by interests external to the quality issue at hand and thus be affected by forces that are rather irrelevant and perhaps even alien to quality assurance.

The issue of quality

Relative and absolute levels of quality

First we want to distinguish between what we call the relative and absolute levels of educational quality. What we here refer to as the *relative level* is a volume-based quality indicator, concerning either the level of education in a certain group or else the proportion of this group, e.g. a cohort that has reached a certain level. The relative level is determined above all by a population's level of education; it is relative in the sense of not making detailed judgements about the absolute quality of education behind a particular degree. The *absolute level*, on the other hand, is exclusively determined by the intrinsic quality of the content or process being judged and does not necessarily take any extraneous circumstances into account.

High level of education and educational standards

According to the above distinction, society can define educational standards by basing them on relative as well as absolute criteria. The former are normally not directly related to quality since they refer to the proportion of the population attaining a certain nominal standard, which may be called this population's average educational attainment. If more people are reaching a certain educational level than before, the population's standard of education may be considered to have risen. The conclusion is that educational quality has been enhanced, without necessarily having analysed the absolute quality of the education involved. In this manner, we would assume a nation with a high HE graduation rate to be better educated than a nation with a low rate. Ensuring high rates of participation and completion are taken as marks of good education.

It is in fact clear that high participation rates, especially when accompanied by broad, equitable access, are top priorities for most European governments.[1] Adopting the perspective we have suggested here, they maintain that participation and completion rates are leading determinants of educational quality within their nations. In harmony with this assessment, they pressure their institutional structures to integrate this view into their policies (97% of European HE institutions think widening access is important, Crosier, Purser, & Smidt, 2007, p. 63), although this incidentally does not always permeate down to lower university echelons. Based on interviews with middle management in UK institutions, Greenbank (2007) suggests:

> … that a culture of widening participation is often not embedded throughout institutions. Therefore, widening participation policy formulated at the senior management level is likely to be reinterpreted, revised - and in many cases even undermined or ignored - as it migrates down the organisational hierarchy (p. 209).

[1] See also a forceful statement by the IUA (International Association of Universities) on the importance of high participation rates and equitable acess: http://www.unesco.org/iau/p_statements/index.html.

The question of quality rises too, of course. We therefore suggest that widening access may somehow affect quality criteria, at least at some level, and we are not the only ones worried, – with the EUA Trends V Report noting that

> Universities and their leaders have a responsibility to stress that widening access does not imply any reduction in quality (Crosier et al., 2007, p. 74).

We doubt there is any disagreement about this, but the question remains of reliable prevention.

Determining an absolute level of quality, on the other hand, focuses on the test or degree(s) in question (e.g. a university degree such as a bachelor's). Having an absolute level implies that a certain standard has been set, for example by such national tests as A levels in the UK or the *Abitur* in Germany, or by such international means as the PISA tests, perhaps to some extent the student examination in the Nordic countries, standards set by national quality assurance agencies, or perhaps the Bologna supplements. Questions of absolute quality centre on the content of such instruments and the demands they set. A high failure rate among those attempting to pass the set criteria may indicate, to some, a high standard and thus high quality. High quality in this regard may even be assured at the cost of a high drop-out or failure rate; indeed, a high failure rate may be interpreted as a clear signal of quality. The judgement applies solely to the group that attempts to attain the standard and those who pass.

Theoretically these two perspectives, the relative and the absolute, are independent and can co-exist without exclusion. In practice, however, it is not merely an academic choice which goal is adopted; it has political implications. The goal that is emphasised may have substantial implications for higher education, and there is no question that the relative or extrinsic criterion is simpler, more transparent and therefore politically more useful.

High-quality learning, in particular professional learning

The notion of (absolute) quality in education is a notably complex issue, constantly under hot debate and in need of scrutiny, no less concerning higher education than other parts of the educational system (see e.g. Doherty, 2008; Houston, 2008; Newton, 2007). Determining the quality of learning depends on the ideas that govern the goals of learning, i.e. the goals of education. In some sense the debate about the nature of education between Plato and the Sophists (as expounded by the former) remains very much alive, in regard both to aims and pedagogical approaches. The question deals not only with what it matters to learn but also how it can best be taught. An essential division in the latter case is between product- and process-oriented approaches, though theories of recent decades have couched this in varying terms. Pedagogical approaches involve how teachers organise their sessions, e.g. with lectures, seminar discussions or case studies, and how they evaluate their students, e.g. to what extent they do this through written examinations, portfolios, observation of performance in practical settings, etc.

Though there is a lively debate at every educational level, it is perhaps fiercest in the arena of professional education. The question of the content, organisation and evaluation of professional education has continued for a long time, discussing the extent to which education of the professional classes is a typical academic exercise and thereby essentially a liberal education programme or to which extent it is primarily an apprenticeship or a technical learning exercise having perhaps nothing to do with liberal education. This turns out to be a complex issue.

Graham (2005) notes that one of the best-known proponents of liberal education, Cardinal Newman, thought that a liberal education would provide an essential background for the professional (p. 54). Labaree (2006), in his analysis of educational development in the USA, notes that there is no clear-cut division between the two, and suggests that

> … over the years, professional education has gradually subverted liberal education. The counterpoint is that, over the same period of time, liberal education has gradually subverted professional education ... [and] that the professional has come to dominate the goals of higher education while the liberal has come to dominate its content (p. 1).

We want to draw attention to the fact that the goals, content and organisation of professional education may be contested; there are stark differences of opinion. There are recent proposals to modify substantially the goals of professional education in the USA, with Sullivan and colleagues (2008) arguing for *practical reason* as the primary substance of a professional education. Teacher education has been challenged in many areas, such as the USA (see e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2006; Labaree, 2004) and Europe, perhaps particularly in the UK. While we are not here emphasising the items of contention, we do point out that no general consensus exists on any of the major issues regarding professional education. This renders it problematic to apply any sort of standardised evaluating instrument. Much more importantly, we note that these fields are likely to be vulnerable to any potential scheme, as they will probably not have established a confident mode of practice. We will above all relate this to various effects of the substantial academic drift occurring within higher education, where programmes are gradually drifting into high-status academia, and accept that they may have to adapt to new rules. But they perhaps lack the confidence to establish their own professional criteria. This does not imply that there is little scope for reform and improvement in any programme; the main question is what forces determine the changes taking place and thus on what basis they are determined.

Institutional and national quality assurance systems

It is of enormous importance in this context to note how institutional and national quality assurance systems each function on their own, and, even more importantly, how they interact with the political realities (read pressures!) acting on them. Each system has to cope with a number of issues that range from ensuring accountability, transparency, feasibility, comparability (in order to foster mobility and competition) to showing respect for government or institutional policy. In addition, each system must be aware of its role (knowing what its evaluation is for) and of its interaction with teachers. We have argued that the basic idea of peer review to ensure research quality might also be adapted to teaching and learning (Jónasson, 2008), although this may prove cumbersome. In any case, we have adopted no substantive positive or negative attitude towards these systems, observing solely that they are themselves important moulding forces (as thery are meant to be), which in turn are influenced by a variety of other strong external and internal forces. They also have to cope continuously with communication problems, with Cartwright (2007) concluding that

> from the point of view of the academic staff who formed part of this research there is a considerable mismatch between the rhetoric of the official paragons of quality represented by the Quality Assurance Agency and the experience of quality by academic staff embroiled in the quality systems that the two universities involved in this research had developed as a consequence of the requirements of government and government agencies (p. 287).

The conclusion of the recent EUA report on the Bologna Process presents a key finding which supports the principal thesis of this paper: that one should pay considerable attention to how the two types of system interact. The report concludes, somewhat dramatically, that

> [m]any higher education systems are currently being held back from Bologna implementation - and thus from offering improved services to students and society - by national QA systems that are costly, offer no evidence of overall quality improvement, and stifle institutions' capacity to respond creatively to the demands of evolving European knowledge society. (Crosier et al., 2007, p. 59)

Systemic forces

A number of forces shape the system of higher education. Even though they are reasonably well known, it is debatable how universal some of them are or how they should be ranked in any single scheme. The following is a brief discussion of some of these forces.

Access policy objectives - evolving towards mass HE

A number of governments have confirmed as a major aim of policy that a sizable, even over half of each cohort should complete a higher education. At the same time, these governments are finding it financially challenging to support the expansion of higher education that they themselves desire.[2] Thus a major policy target coincides with a demand for financial stringency, thereby putting enormous pressure on HE institutions. Yet again, this makes clear how general and forceful government policy affects HE developments in a number of different ways. Despite this being no news, it begs a number of questions. Those particularly relevant to this paper are how this contradiction affects HE development at both the macro and micro level, not least the extent to which it impinges on the issue of determining teaching quality and the evaluation of HE learning. Per se, of course, the basic policy could be interpreted as improving any population's educational attainment and thus educational quality in the nation.

Efficiency and productivity policies - coping with smaller funds per student

A clear result of general policy becomes obvious within the institutions: they place considerable pressure on school departments to increase efficiency and productivity, whether in teaching or research. The trend is increasingly to tie funding to the number of students registered, number of units completed or even to the number of graduates (Eurydice, 2008, see chapter 3). Simultaneously, there is a trend towards tying research funding to research output in terms of papers published, which applies pressure in many ways competing with the pressure on teaching productivity. The net outcome of these policy directions is entirely understandable and quite strong: the institutions make a massive effort to fulfil contracts in order to maximise state contributions, no matter where the institution is positioned within the system.

The credential race - more emphasis on students obtaining degrees

An important force is the credential race among students. As the rate of graduation within any society grows, it becomes increasingly imperative, at least when participation reaches above a certain level, to acquire a university degree in order to have the option of a good job, as jobs become ever more closely tied to degrees and the number of degree-holders competing for each such job increases.

Under pressure from such students, as well as from their own institutions and public authorities, academics feel the pressure to deliver, to produce the expected goods efficiently and in great numbers. This has been a subject of debate in the USA (Brown, 1995; Collins, 1979, 2002; Labaree, 1997) and is related to the issue of quality, since an inference is that gradually less effort is required to achieve the degree or certain grades, even to the extent that neither can any longer be taken seriously as marks of quality education. This relates to the discussion in the US on grade inflation (Hersh & Merrow, 2005; Hunt, 2008), which implies that standards may be lowered . The European debate on credentialism has been less prominent (Dore, 1976; Jónasson, 2006; Van der Werfhorst & Andersen, 2005), but we suggest that European systems are facing developments similar to those in the USA. The value of education is being transferred to mere signals rather than being based on ingredients. Naturally, no

[2] See OECD press release, September 2008: Soaring student numbers pose funding and quality challenges for universities in OECD countries.

problem occurs until these become divorced, i.e. when a certain degree is no longer believed to guarantee a certain competence. The students realise a need for credentials, sometimes even more than for the skills they are supposed to acquire. Indeed, whereas very few jobs demand exactly the skills acquired at university, many do require the particular credentials offered. Logically, for many students it is the degree and credits they are aiming for, rather than educational content. If this becomes the accepted state of affairs, it may of course have decisive effects on how students judge the education they are receiving or evaluate the teaching and how institutions organise their courses. We are alluding to this development when we refer to student drift as part of academic drift.

Academic drift - reshaping the HE system and turning more institutions into HE institutions

Another result of the most common government policy is a reshaping of the HE sector, largely in order to reach the major government goals of participation and enhanced professional education. The principal means is through redefining HE institutions so as to allow for government goals to be reached without overloading the traditional university sector too dramatically, but also so as to prevent too dramatic a shift from vocationally oriented programmes to academic ones. This is a part of the forces driving the academic institutional drift evidenced in the European HE sector.

In fact a relatively old notion in HE literature (Neave, 1979, 1983; Riesman, 1956), the notion of academic drift has recently been revived (Jónasson, 2005, 2006; Kyvik, 2007; Morphew, 2000). Academic drift is a very broad concept and as such can be regarded as an overarching concept referring to the overall tendency of the educational system to change in such a manner that institutions start resembling or approaching the university as the epitome of prestige. We wish to divide the overarching concept into three basic components, albeit accepting that the six-category division suggested by Kyvik (2007) may sometimes be more appropriate (see the extra Kyvik categories within parentheses in the next sentence, where our three are italicised). The three basic components in our view are *system drift* (policy and sector drift), *institutional drift* (staff, programme and institutional drift) and *student drift* (also a Kyvik category).

System drift refers to changes in the general sector of higher education, for instance when a tertiary system changes from including wide divergence from the definition of a university to a system where all institutions have moved closer to this definition than before, with the state fulfilling an important role in this movement (Neave, 1979; Jónasson, 2004; Jóhannsdóttir, 2006). While this drift is often accompanied by new policies, they are normally formulated in concert with the sector itself.

Institutional drift, on the other hand, means the tendency of individual non-university institutions to move closer to the traditional definition of a university; in this case the institutions themselves are the primary actors, though they sometimes have government support. According to our categorisation, the phenomenon of institutional drift also includes the tendency of the departments and faculty or other teachers at non-university institutions to adopt academic values. New teacher recruiting becomes increasingly based on higher university degrees and academic merits, while faculty members prioritise research and publications in scientific journals (Jóhannsdóttir, 2006; Jónasson, 2004b; Kyvik, 2007).

Student body drift refers to a student population that tend[s] to choose academic-based programs in preference to vocationally based programs. Here the student body or school clients are the main actors (Jónasson, 2004, p.276; see also above the reference for credentialism).

In the present paper, the main focus will be on *system drift* and *institutional drift*. Numerous examples could have also been taken from the other categories, however, to stress how the extremely strong undercurrents of any drift category shape various aspects of

institutions in telling ways. We will now discuss several aspects of system and institutional drift in order to reinforce our thesis that the dynamic forces operating through such drift may substantially influence or even dominate various operations within institutions. Among the impacted operations are any current quality assurance processes.

System and institutional drift

It is important to create specific criteria for discerning academic drift, a process that may take some time. It could well be that signs of the drift will be observed long before the transformation formally happens. Since we are referring to the drift of non-university institutions towards the model of a prestigious university, the criteria should reflect university characteristics; we suggest the following. I) Firstly, we suggest a criterion based on research; for example, there are rules and regulations covering research which determine the extent to which teachers in non-university institutions are to perform research. II) Secondly, we wish to point to the classification of programme examinations, the extent to which study programmes lead to recognised university degrees. These criteria draw on Neave (1979) and Halsey (1983); their results demonstrated a drift of teachers in non-university institutions as they gradually begin to carry out research and of study programmes as they are gradually transformed into university degree programmes. III) The above two criteria imply a third, i.e., the sort of faculty titles used and the extent to which non-university institutions adopt university titles. IV) Moreover, the first two criteria imply yet a fourth, which has to do with individual promotion arrangements, i.e. whether and in what way faculty members can apply for promotion. Ordinarily, promotion is granted after scrutinising such academic work of the applicant as research and academic publications, thereby adhering to traditional university criteria. V) This catch-all criterion is for the sake of completeness, in order to cover other relevant criteria used within the traditional university sector.

Even though the criteria or drifts above are not normally couched in quality terms, there is no particular hindrance to doing so. Criterion I is likely to have consequences for teaching, because it relegates teaching from top-priority to (a poor?) second, which is certainly problematic. Also, this criterion may direct teaching towards a more theoretical arena. While there is a chance that this could be beneficial to the educational goals adopted, the switch may not be based on a rational decision that such an emphasis is preferable for the students, but rather that it is more convenient as it relates to research work, in addition to being more interesting to the teacher personally. Criterion II has very clear implications for degree contents, aiming to result in a respectable university degree, with a significantly theoretical or academic flair. Criteria III and IV have implications similar to those of the first one, i.e. they push for a theoretical or academic emphasis. We must be very specific about the points we are making here; we are not declaring whether the effects are finally good or bad, except in the case of saying that when a task is lowered from first to second priority this is probably bad, although this effect might be compensated for. Our principal point is that institutional drift has noticeable and probably telling effects on various institutional quality matters, indeed probably far stronger effects than any quality guidelines that are in operation, regardless of whether they harmonise or not.

System and institutional drift; specific examples

An example of system drift is the tendency of European governments to merge specialised, post-secondary colleges (at least previously unrelated to universities) to a binary HE system consisting of a university sector and a college sector of multidisciplinary college centres. While this college sector can always be related to the university sector in some ways, it varies between countries how close the college sector approaches the university sector.

In a comparative study exploring the development of Nordic higher education systems and of institutions within these systems (Jóhannsdóttir, 2006), the Nordic HE system was discovered to vary in this respect.

Norway, for example, has a binary system (adopted in 1994) including a university college sector (*højskolesektorn*) that closely resembles the university sector. University colleges can even apply for complete university status by fulfilling certain conditions. Two university colleges have already obtained university status and others are planning on applying. Therefore, the Norwegian government is deliberating the adoption of a unified HE system that would merge university colleges and the universities (NOU, 2008). In spite of the decision not having actually been made to adopt a unified system, we argue from past experience that the colleges have been edging and will in future probably continue to edge towards university status.

The Danish HE system reveals similar structural changes. In 2000, Denmark gradually began to merge its specialised post-secondary colleges to create college centres. In 2007, they merged all of these college centres and what independent colleges remained into university college centres (*professionshøjskoler*). Nonetheless, the Danish college sector is practically separated from the university sector. At least for the time being, the university college centres cannot obtain university status and are comparatively quite removed from the university sector. Still, if the situation in Denmark proves true to the general pattern, college centres will strive to fulfil university criteria, as described above, and thus reshape their programmes. This is likely to occur irrespective of government policy, which in fact may not encourage that trend.

Turning to our own country, Iceland, clear examples of institutional drift include a) non-university institutions being upgraded to universities, with the 1971 upgrading of the Icelandic Teacher Training College to University College providing a specific instance of this modification and b) vocational education offered in non-university institutions being transferred to universities, with the transfer of Icelandic nursing education in 1973 from an independent school to the University of Iceland serving as an obvious instance of this (Jónasson, 2004a).

Developments in the Norwegian and Danish HE systems, as described above, have been demonstrated to reflect the same structural change in each of the two countries, but positioned at different stages. In order to understand the difference between them, it is useful to consider the development of college sector institutions in each of the countries.

Norwegian colleges have increasingly adopted university criteria. For quite some time, university college teachers have used university titles and been expected to engage in research. The study programmes lead to university degrees even if they are not the highest degree, i.e. the Ph.D. degree. Also, promotion systems exist not only for university college teachers but even for entire institutions (Jóhannsdóttir, 2006).

The Danish case differs. University college teachers do not use university titles and are not supposed to engage in research. On the other hand, they are supposed to participate in development projects. Even if study programmes do not lead to any university degree, a professional bachelor is awarded. Although this is actually changing, it is not happening in the same manner as in Norway, where mergers between universities and university colleges have occurred in some places and an even more grandiose, nationwide merger has been debated, though it has not yet been decided. Nevertheless, Danish developments seem to threaten or undermine the activities of university colleges. This threat first materialised with the application of Århus University (2007) for an authorisation to offer education for primary school teachers at university level, ending in a university degree. While this authorisation was granted, the government put its implementation on hold and appointed a committee for further deliberation. It was only recently[3] that the government announced two types of

[3] A press release on this matter was issued on 29 August 2008.

"supplementary" teacher education programmes. The first programme is for aspiring primary school teachers and relies on collaboration between the universities and university colleges. A 3+1 programme, it entails a bachelor degree at university in addition to one year at a university college. The second supplementary programme, entailing 3+2 years, is meant for aspiring secondary school teachers and is offered by universities. Through these offerings, the government hopes to reach a student group that does not otherwise enrol to become primary school teachers. According to the Danish minister of education, this renders "it possible to recruit students to the teacher profession from the group of students that begin at the university ... because that is what they do". Thus this is viewed as an effort to reach out to a group of students who would not normally attend university, and was mostly decided because of too few applications to the teacher education programmes offered at university colleges (Ministeriet for videnskab teknology og udvikling, 2008).

It could be argued that this will undermine the status of the newly established university college sector (2007), since teacher training is a major field in its operations. Moreover, one might speculate by analogy about the health sector, since education for the health professions also makes up a substantial part of university college programmes. The same logic might indicate the necessity of appealing in the same way to still another group of students and thereby attracting them to health professions. While this would also be a realistic option, it would leave the position of the colleges, i.e. the *professionshöjskoler*, somewhat unpalatable, even before they are fully up and running.

It is noteworthy that at the same time as studies are being transferred from colleges to universities, another change is taking place which seems to strengthen the university colleges. In June 2007 the Danish government announced plans to augment vocational and adult education, which till then was not regarded as part of Danish HE. This plan calls for establishing so-called vocational academies (*erhvervsakademier*) that are rooted in the vocational schools (*erhvervsskoler*) offering short vocational study programmes. The main aim is to strengthen vocational and adult education, mainly in technical and mercantile areas, as well as to create conditions for a *professionsbachelor* degree. Ten vocational academies are to be established, and in order to offer any technical and mercantile *professionsbachelor* they have to establish a partnership with a university college.

These ideas have been legislated through the Act on ("Erhvervsakademiuddannelser og professionsbacheloruddannelser nr 207/2008,") and the Act on ("Erhvervsakademier for videregående uddannelser nr. 346/2008,").

The essence of the drift in progress in Denmark has been described in some detail by Jónasson (2006).

We have presented these examples in order to suggest that the "politics" of academic drift, inspired by a range of far-reaching ambitions, have overriding effects on every aspect of institutional operation, in particular on quality. This is not to say that these two ideas are unrelated, or that the arguments for engineering such a drift are not at least partly driven by arguments for enhancing quality. Instead, what we are maintaining is that, whatever the effects of these drift-related changes, it is the drift that is largely dominant, even in control. Quality, in contrast, we suggest, will only be enhanced to the extent that processes of academic drift permit, rather than to the extent that quality assurance mechanisms might call for.

Interaction of the various forces shaping HE

We have hypothesised that quality enforcement, which is receiving avid attention in the European HE sector, may not only be affected by specific concerns within the arena of quality - a quite complex arena, as we have tried to demonstrate (see also Newton, 2007) - but may

also be substantially affected by various forces shaping the universities or the tertiary sector more generally.

We must be careful to pinpoint our claims. We are not suggesting that quality systems are not operating properly or not achieving their purpose. Sybille Reichert, in her introduction to an EUA forum on quality assurance, notes that during university evaluations in which she participated, the institutions

> gave me the impression that, in those institutions at least, internal quality assurance was alive and kicking and far from being a merely bureaucratic exercise (Beso et al., 2008, p. 7).

On the other hand, we are definitely not suggesting that all is well. The claim in this paper is that all of the trends described are happening at the same time and are of course interacting within the institutional flora at any moment and at every level. The presence of these interactions is of course empirically verifiable, even though they are presented here only as propositions or hypotheses. Our endeavour is to frame the effects of these trends and their interplay in descriptive, value-free terms, and merely to suggest concretely what we believe is happening as the overall system develops. To take an example, we suggest that the standards applied will gradually adjust to the proportion of the cohort being assessed, which may not necessarily mean any lowering of standards, since opinions on that may depend on perspective: it depends on what you mean.

Table 1 schematises the interactions we envisage. Before studying it, there are a number of provisos to explain. Please note that our suggestions are tentative and are phrased in very general terms that need elaboration. Furthermore, we have endeavoured to express them in value-free language, and when any values can be inferred from our text, it is merely inadvertent and unintentional, except where specifically mentioned. Note also how we envisage all levels of teaching as applying high quality e-systems extensively. Whereas this will in some cases stay totally independent of the forces under discussion, sometimes it will not. Distance education is a case in point. At times it was very expensive and inefficient in relative terms, seen from the institutional perspective, but was a policy urged on by governments. In recent years the opposite is becoming true, with e-systems gaining efficiency from the institutional perspective. The same relationship may hold for various general aspects of ICT.

Table 1. The suggested two dimensions of systemic (vertical) and quality (horizontal) factors. This table is meant to be indicative rather than exhaustive. Each cell is numbered for reference and should state the potential interaction between the two factors. Where we surmise a conflict of interest to exist between the macro (systemic) and micro (faculty) forces, we have identified that individual cell with *CI. Where we have marked a cell with *P, we see developments as potentially problematic or non-beneficial. In every cell the text should be taken as tentative, i.e., as if it were preceded by an introduction such as "Tendency towards ...".

Quality perspectives **Systemic perspectives**	*Organisation of teaching (and assessment of learning)*	*Organisation of programme (and assessment of learning)*	*Quality assurance (internal, external)*	*Accreditation mechanisms*	*Bologna Process*
Greater number of students - efficiency and productivity	1.1) *CI, *P. More lecturing, less discussion, fewer projects, more multi-student presentations, more formal examinations, standards adjusted to the proportion registered from the cohort	1.2) Less coaching and direct interaction, especially at lower levels	1.3) *CI More pressure on effective teaching, attempts to reduce drop-out	1.5)	1.6)
Policy of widening access			Adapting quality to a wider clientele	Widening of the criteria applied, increased differentiation	
Systemic drift	2.1) *P. Programmes becoming more uniform	2.2) Programmes becoming more academic, despite policy statements to the contrary; lengthening of programmes, with 3 becoming 3+2, etc.	2.3)	2.5)	2.6)
Bologna process	3.1)	3.2)	3.3)	3.5)	3.6)
Institutional drift	4.1) The first cycle becoming more school-like, more characterised as a first stage	4.2) The first cycle becoming more school-like, as contact with the subject field shifts to the master's level	4.3)	4.5) Pressure to distinguish between institutions and also pressure not to	4.6) Institutions entering more thoroughly into the Bologna system, a lengthening of programmes
Credential race	5.1) More formalised assessment, increased transparency, standards ensuring progress through the system	5.2) Organisational simplicity	5.3)	5.5) Pressure to distinguish between institutions and also pressure not to	5.6) A lengthening of programmes

In the following comments, we will begin by summarising, mentioning what we feel are the most dramatic effects of funding on university operations and thereby on every aspect of quality.

There is no question that system financing probably acts as the most decisive determinant of the route taken. In the EUA report on the Bologna Process, Trends V, it is made quite clear that funding schemes have direct, decisive effects, since

> [r]esearchers noted that in several systems, universities are financed to a large extent on the basis of either numbers of enrolled students or numbers of successful graduates - in the second as well as the first cycle. Such a funding system acts as a clear financial incentive for institutions to encourage their students to continue to the second cycle rather than to explore other options. It also acts as a brake to any development of vertical mobility between the cycles (Crosier et al., 2007, p. 23).

Now the question obviously arises what implicit or explicit means institutions have of encouraging their students to continue. There are of course a number of venues open and various interests to take into account. We might surmise that for a variety of reasons an institution might have a tendency to act leniently towards a student in the first cycle, confident that this may be compensated for in the second cycle. It is no surprise that the influence of funds is a universal problem that probably impacts all but the very wealthiest of the world's universities. From Kenya, Wangenge-Ouma (2008) argues convincingly, (on what we think demonstrates a universality of a problem) on the basis of vivid, transparent data that

> Kenya's public universities were precipitately subjected to diminished public capitation, and so was their plunging into marketisation … The desire to claim a bigger share in the student market has seen the introduction of many new courses in advance of capacity to offer them. … [b]y seeking economic self-determination through full fee-paying programmes, in advance of a well-developed institutional capacity, the subsequent pressure seems to have made the quality situation worse (p. 457).

This should not be taken as an input into the debate over HE marketisation, and we simply state here that there are, not surprisingly, firm links between levels of quality and the economic necessities with which institutions must deal.

General discussion

We have attempted to show that quality can be defined from a wide array of perspectives that may have various political implications for universities. We have also tried to explain that any definition of educational quality, such as the quality of professional education, will be highly contested and lead to two complications. One is that it may become very difficult to administer any external, transparent quality assurance scheme that transfers directly between cultures. The second complication is that it will be difficult for institutions introducing quality schemes while moving up in the academic status hierarchy to resist the rules set by established academia whenever they drift into new academic territory. They cannot then claim that their previous evaluation criteria is more appropriate, as these are not met by full credibility because of status problems. In this connection it is interesting to note Darling-Hammond's (2006) description of best practice in teacher education in the USA, showing that good practice can be exhibited in many different wyas.

In this presentation, we have also tried to argue the existence of forceful undercurrents in HE developments. By this we mean not only credentialism, but above all the various versions of academic drift. In this connection we have suggested that a credential seen as a public good may promote different quality criteria from those which emerge if they are solely considered a private good. It is complicated however as both the public and the private stakeholders may be in two minds about which they value more, the comptetence it is supposed to signify, or just the symbol (i.e. just having the degree). Our discussion of examples from the Nordic countries, including in some detail current processes in Denmark, should support our claim that what we might call institutional politics has an overriding effect on institutional operations. The Danish case provides an especially transparent process of academic drift, with the forces laid bare, as the national government enters into play and manipulates the system in part with the students and in part with the institutions themselves. No room is left for accreditation and quality mechanisms to operate in a natural way, but we suggest through the examples given and further observations that government politics will end up playing second fiddle to academic drift.

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