

Views from below: academics coping with quality

Jethro Newton

Keynote presentation at the Sixth QHE Seminar
in association with EAIR and SRHE

Birmingham, UK

26th May, 2001

Views from below: academics coping with quality

1. Introduction

This paper considers the impact of quality from the perspective of those engaged at the learner-teacher interface in higher education, front-line academics. Its title borrows from the field of the sociology of deviance; more specifically an 'appreciative study' of delinquent boys completed in the mid-1970s by Howard Parker (1974). The paper reports on an investigation, ongoing since the early 1990s, of how academics have viewed, responded to, and coped with the quality assurance arrangements typically developed in UK universities in the last decade or so, and also the external quality monitoring arrangements put in place at national level during the same period. In accordance with the precepts of an 'appreciative' approach, I have aimed to portray something of the ethos and meaning of the world of front-line academics as they have sought to make sense of the 'quality revolution'. Following Williams (1988), this study, now in its second phase, has been a *systematic experiment in reflective practice taking the form of an extended conversation with a developing organisational situation*.

Drawing on data and results from each phase of the research, including recent focus group interviews, the paper connects with the seminar's key themes by considering whether quality monitoring, externally or internally driven, has led to improvements for staff, for students, and for higher education generally, or whether it has produced somewhat sterile and ritualistic 'game-playing', with 'performances' and 'impression management' carefully designed to fulfil the requirements of quality assurance and monitoring processes. The paper plots the 'career' of the notion of quality through the 1990s to the present and, by applying a deconstructionist test, identifies some of the lessons learned over that period. Academics' perceptions of prospects for coping with the emerging QAA framework are also considered. The paper concludes by reasserting the merits of fine-grained, close-up study of academics engaged with higher education policy, and notes that opportunities to conduct such research have been largely overlooked by the academic community.

The paper is structured to facilitate discussion of the following:

- higher education as 'grotesque turbulence': external quality monitoring and the changing context of academic work
- reflections on external quality assessment in the UK since the early 1990s
- deconstructing quality: lessons of the 1990s
- the merits of an appreciative, contextualised perspective
- academics coping with quality: adopting or adapting quality policy
- academics' perceptions of emerging quality monitoring arrangements in the UK

2. Higher education as 'grotesque turbulence': external quality monitoring and the changing context of academic work

Higher education in the UK and elsewhere in the world continues to undergo massive change. It has moved on from the *collegial academy* described by McNay (McNay, 1995), or even the *tribes and territories* portrayed in Becher's academic community (Becher, 1989). But what hasn't changed is the perception that higher education is beset by what one newly-appointed Vice Chancellor described in 1994 as '*grotesque turbulence*' (Webb, 1994, p 43). All who work in higher education today continue to have to deal, on a day-to-day basis, with the *complex interaction between the planned and the serendipitous* (Webb, p.43). Since the mid 1990s, we have seen the competition for students becoming more intense, the use of ICT forcing major changes in the way in which higher education is designed and delivered, and virtually insupportable pressures of low funding and continuous efficiency gains being placed on the structures of higher education. This background inevitably influences how we understand today's 'academic community' since there have been fundamental changes in the context and conditions of academic work, not the least of which has been the encroachment of 'new managerialism' - a manifestation of a more global process of neo-liberal economic and political transformation.

This turbulence and uncertainty has become a defining characteristic of today's higher education systems. It is not surprising therefore that by the end of the 1990s, many academics had grown increasingly sceptical of, and resistant to, the growth of the 'quality industry' and the 'quality burden'. For these staff, as for Trow (1994), the growth of quality monitoring regimes became associated with academic de-professionalisation. As this paper seeks to argue, given the growing encroachment of the monitoring activities of external quality bodies, and the development of internal quality monitoring arrangements, there is no doubt that increased accountability and 'intrusion' have presented a significant challenge for front-line academics engaged on a day-to-day basis at the 'learning-teaching interface'.

The longitudinal focus of this paper enables me to draw on case study material and data gathered in two distinct phases at the research site (NewColl) during the UK 'quality revolution'. Firstly, the period leading up to 1997, by which time the frameworks for external quality audit at institutional level, and quality assessment at subject level, established under the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, had been in operation for some four years. Secondly, the period around 1999/2001 when a completely new framework for the external review of both quality and standards in universities was piloted and made ready for implementation on a UK-wide basis. The present landscape for quality in higher education, and the prevailing perceptions of academics, have been shaped during each of these phases.

The second of these phases falls into the 'post-Dearing' era. The Dearing Report in 1997 (NICHE) recommended that two new agencies be created to implement its reforms. The professional accreditation of academics as teachers fell into the first of these, with the establishment of the Institute for Learning and Teaching. The second, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), a registered charity technically owned by the universities, has set out the new quality and standards framework currently being implemented in UK higher education. All of the elements of 'new managerialism', referred to earlier, are evident in each of these new bodies and initiatives. They establish pseudo-markets, they undertake surveillance and policing of organisations' own systems of control, and they do so through *action at a distance* (Shore and Wright, 2000, p 71). They have also created new, ostensibly independent, experts whose knowledge is used as the basis for systems of audit, inspection and accreditation. These bodies, then, exercise what Shore and Wright have termed *arms-length control* over the UK academic community and its universities.

The changes described, with which front-line academics are confronted on a daily basis, continue to unfold in an epoch of change in higher education which has been characterised by the rise of 'audit culture' (Power, 1994), and what Shore and Wright (2000) have termed the *rapid and relentless spread of coercive technologies into higher education* (Shore and Wright, 2000, p. 57). It is surprising therefore that, even though it is manifestly the case that few processes have had such a profound impact in the re-shaping of academics' conditions of work and behaviours, *this major transformation remains curiously under-researched and under-theorised* (p. 57). As Smyth argues:

That we [academics] devote so little time to analysing what it is we do, and how others are increasingly coming to shape that work, must be one of the great unexplained educational issues of our time.

This paper seeks to go some way towards bringing some aspects of 'academics at work' out of the closet, and to subject it to the kind of analysis and discussion that it so obviously merits.

3. The English Patient: some reflections on external quality assessment in UK higher education

In 1994, Martin Trow, in his critique of the introduction of external quality assessment, was amongst the first to associate this development with the rise of managerialism which, in turn, he linked to a withdrawal of the 'trust' accorded to the academic community. For Jim Graham, reflecting on his experiences at the School of Education, University of East London (Graham, 2000), today's combination of low trust, high accountability, competing models of quality and external quality monitoring, uncosted extra workload, and the absence of any real evaluation of the evaluators, symbolises a quality assessment 'sickness', or 'pathology', which has befallen UK higher education. Graham goes on to describe some of the (presumably

unintended) consequences of this 'sickness' - consequences which are likely to be familiar to us all. He cites the huge workload associated with QAA external review; the inadequacies of OfSTED/TTA 'snapshot' and 'dipstick' inspections of teacher training provision; the frequency and burden of quality assessment in a resource-starved system which, paradoxically, detracts from the delivery of quality; the loss of professional trust and consensus; the drift towards a risk-averse higher education system; and the lack of investment in quality enhancement.

To pursue the 'sickness' analogy: what are the principal dimensions of this pathological state, and how do academics perceive and position themselves in relation to it? Some insights are provided by the results of a study of the UK Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) exercise, undertaken jointly by Roger Cook, academic adviser, Napier University, and the Times Higher, published in March of this year (THES, 2001). The TQA exercise, subsequently styled subject review, has involved a ten-year project to judge the quality of teaching in every university department in the UK. According to 'The Higher', analysis of its data *underpins the long-held views of academics and quality assurance specialists that the system was flawed* (p.7). The analysis covers more than 8,300 individual grades, awarded in reports on more than 1,300 university departments published since the external assessment exercise adopted a numerical format for reporting in 1995.

'Gamesmanship', 'performance', and 'impression management' as responses to external quality assessment

The Times Higher claims that its analysis provides clear statistical evidence that the various criticisms from many academics are justified, and that *the project has been blighted by elitism, favouritism, gamesmanship, and grade inflation* (p. 7). Here I shall consider the last two of these, 'gamesmanship' and 'grade inflation', and also the 'cost' element. The Higher's analysis claims that TQA has cost every department in each university, from £20, 000 to £200,000 in paperwork and staff time for each of the 1,300 or so visits, with the total cost to the sector amounting to £100 million. It goes on to consider the evidence on what for some academics has rendered the exercise all but meaningless, namely, grade inflation. Their data suggests that:

- firstly, in the 1998/2000 period, the proportion of departments achieving 22 or 24 points (excellent) has increased from about 25% in 1995/96 to 60.5%, and that
- secondly, the average scores are increasing: from 20.40 in 1996/98 and up to 21.70 in 1998/2000.

To what extent is this data open to the interpretation that quality has improved? Or, as many academics would suggest, should be draw the conclusion that the figures are too dramatic to be explained in such terms? Roger Cook, who compiled the data on behalf of 'The Higher', is quite convinced that the evidence points to 'gamesmanship' being at the centre of the picture: *I firmly believe that this [grade inflation] is a product of institutional learning*. He goes on to argue that university departments *have become adept at writing what the inspectors want to see*. Moreover:

Academics have also been taught how to impress the QAA through training courses where assessors themselves often reveal the secrets of the process.

As Geoffrey Alderman (THES, p. 7), himself a trainer, has expressed it:

The TQA industry has given rise to a quality assurance industry, of which I am a part. It's become outdoor relief for underpaid academics.

He goes on to reinforce the *gamesmanship*' analogy by asserting that:

The dons have outsmarted the government by turning the exercise into a game and playing it brilliantly(p. 7).

But should we be at all surprised that academics have adapted their behaviour in this way? In reporting results from my own research in 1999, I noted that the impact of external quality monitoring had alerted us to the dangers of 'ritualism' and 'tokenism' with participants primarily engaged in learning 'the rules of the game'. One of my informants expressed it in this way:

Well it's the question of 'feeding the beast' and meaningless ritual because what we know is that academics are bright and therefore they get very smart at playing the game, depending on how they're going to be assessed, you know, like students...(Respondent 41).

Brennan (1995) had earlier drawn attention to the dangers and pitfalls of self-evaluation, which of course lies at the centre of most academic quality systems, arguing that if self-evaluation is motivated exclusively by public relations concerns, or is externally imposed, then this may encourage compliance or concealment. This same theme was also taken up by Underwood (1998) who, in his observations on TQA/subject review, refers to *stories of universities which schedule their routine programme of decoration and maintenance round the forward programme of QA visits* and to *individual lecturers who have completely revised their teaching materials in advance of a visit* (p 52). De Vries (1997, p 96) had also expressed similar concerns about how the methods adopted for preparing for external assessment mask reality from the gaze of external assessors:

Consequently, surface issues are brought to the fore and the covert remain intact. The result is that cosmetic enhancement is often effected and the losers are the students and the education process itself.

Such observations remind us of how the sociologist, Erving Goffman, portrayed social actors as *performing* on different stages in everyday life (Goffman, 1959; 1967). They provide a Goffmanesque view of how, in preparations for external assessment, teams of academics are schooled, through careful stage-management and impression management.

All of this may be familiar to those who have assisted in preparations for, or been involved in, external monitoring exercises. Such management of impressions, and attention to detail, have underpinned preparations for all such events at the research site (NewColl) over the period of my research. Similar findings have been reported by Brennan and his colleagues (Brennan et al., 1997, p 38) in their study of the impact of HEFCE quality assessment, in which 180 staff in 53 subject groups in 12 higher education institutions were interviewed. They concluded that quality assessment was resulting in *game playing strategies* in many institutions:

Most of the staff we interviewed...felt under enormous pressure - more students, fewer resources, the RAE, more bureaucracy - and quality assessment was regarded frequently as just another hurdle to be surmounted. This could provoke a 'game playing' attitude to the assessment process (p. 38).

Trowler (1998a) has taken further the notion of organisational cultures operating in several arenas. As Trowler puts it, there is a distinction to be drawn between: *front-of-stage (the public arena); back-stage (where deals are done); and under-the-stage (where gossip is purveyed)* (p 27). This notion of the 'stages' of articulation of organisational culture (p 27), along with Goffman's notions of 'impression management' and 'dramaturgical performance' (Goffman, 1959), provides valuable insights into the implementation of quality policy and, in particular, how staff respond to, 'cope' with and perhaps even re-shape policy requirements. It also enables us to pose the question whether external assessment serves 'quality improvement' purposes for an institution and its academic staff, or whether 'impression management' takes over.

As Underwood (1998, p 52) suggests:

If improvement is happening [in the sector], it is more as a result of the stick than

the carrot. One would love to believe that intense debate and reflection on teaching and learning and the student experience of higher education is taking place across the system: but the phrase 'siege mentality' may be nearer the truth.

This scenario leads Harvey and Knight (1996, p 97) to urge reconsideration of priorities:

At a time of declining resources it is important to get the balance right between the demands on academic staff to respond to external quality monitoring...and the need to invest in continuous improvement of the quality of the student experience, through staff development, innovation in teaching and learning, research and scholarship.

4. Deconstructing quality: lessons of the 1990s

But what other lessons are to be learned from the ten or so years of the 'quality revolution' in the UK, since the legislative foundations for the external quality monitoring edifice were first put in place? In particular, what have we learned from those engaged at the learning-teaching interface about how they, as front-line academics, perceive, respond to and cope with quality? Before looking in detail, in remaining sections of the paper, at what academics tell us about 'coping with quality', in order to unpack what I regard as some of the principal lessons learned I shall, firstly, reflect on the 'career' of the notion of 'quality' in UK higher education and its passage through the 1990s. Secondly, to assist this analysis of what quality has come to mean for front-line academics in the wider academic community, I shall briefly draw together the main findings and conclusions of the first phase of my ethnographic study of the implementation of quality systems at a UK college of higher education, and of the impact of quality monitoring on members of that academic community.

The meaning of quality: the career of a concept

My starting point is informed by a theme taken up by Lee Harvey in his keynote presentation to the 1999 INQAAHE conference in Santiago, Chile, when he urged researchers in the field of 'quality policy' in higher education to take every opportunity to engage in critical social research centring around 'evaluating the evaluators'. Such research, he argued, should be contextualised in its approach, should be willing to engage with the politics of quality, should dig beneath the surface, should dialectically deconstruct prevailing perceptions, and should seek to assist in the reconstruction of alternative understandings of quality and quality processes.

During the 1990s we witnessed a proliferation in the use of the notion of 'quality' in higher education. It became extended into contexts where it had previously seldom been used. It became a central term in the lexicon of contemporary higher education and a major point of interest to various interest groups. Quality migrated or was imported from its more familiar industrial and commercial settings of the 1980s, into the domain of higher education and also other professional and public service settings - what Shore and Wright refer to as *conceptual inflation* (2000, p. 59). Following Williams (1976) they view 'quality' as a 'keyword'. Over time, *keywords acquire a range of contingent meanings* (Shore and Wright, 2000, p. 59). The importance of understanding the contingent and context-related meaning of quality is discussed later.

The original repertoire of formal meanings of the early 1990s, which those in the academic quality industry examined, debated, and sought to import into their own institutional settings, driven by both internal and external imperatives, is typified by the following 'stakeholder-relative' conceptual framework:

- quality as exceptional or excellence
- quality as perfection or consistency
- quality as fitness for purpose
- quality as value for money
- quality as transformation of the learner

(Harvey and Green, 1993)

To this might be added other formal notions of quality which were prevalent at the time. For example, quality as 'customer satisfaction', quality as 'peer review', and so on.

Those in higher education who sought, in the early 1990s, to put in place quality systems, and all of the accompanying paraphernalia of quality bureaucracy - and I include myself amongst them - were animated by attempts to define, categorise, customise, and operationalise a notion of 'quality' which would best suit their own particular institutional context. They often searched for the best model or, better still, a 'blueprint' which could be transplanted into their own institutional context. In doing so they were influenced, either consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, by 'definitions' such as those contained in Harvey and Green's widely-known conceptual framework, noted earlier. Typically, established elite universities in the UK adopted the notion of 'quality as excellence', whilst access-driven, newly-established universities opted for the 'quality as fitness of purpose' definition, as indeed did those who designed the methodologies for external quality monitoring at national level in the UK. This occurred at a time when much energy was being devoted in UK universities to developing systems, defining quality assurance roles and responsibilities, and articulating with new external monitoring arrangements. Institutionally, university pro vice chancellors acquired new 'quality' portfolios, quality committees were established, quality support units set up and arrangements were generally mirrored at the level of faculty. Much, if not all, of this was in the cause of meeting the requirements of external quality monitoring agencies.

By the mid-1990s, academics felt themselves to be in an environment where they were required to give regular and formal accounts of themselves, and the quality of their work, whether to external or to internal bodies. Increasingly, staff in UK higher education were focused on getting a good 'result' from whatever internal or external quality processes they faced. For Henkel (2000), even if accountability had become, more or less, something with which academics were now being confronted on a daily basis in their working lives, it found its most public and intense expression in TQA. Though academics sought, with difficulty, to articulate and re-assert their own definitions of quality, which, as Henkel argues, *remained essentially discipline-centred* (Henkel, p. 106), quality had become equated with bureaucratisation, educational orthodoxy, and conformity (pp 96-104).

That 'quality' in higher education had, by the mid-1990s, become associated by most in the UK academic community with 'bureaucracy', 'burden', and 'accountability', was a pervasive theme of my own research findings in the late 1990s. The full picture of those research outcomes has been presented and discussed elsewhere (Newton, 1999a; 1999b; 2000), but a brief summary here will help to illustrate something of how the meaning of 'quality' for front-line academics had evolved and been shaped during the 'quality revolution', and how quality systems and quality monitoring came to be viewed and interpreted by them.

My original survey respondents overwhelmingly saw NewColl's quality system as having met external and internal accountability requirements. They also took the view that it facilitated 'good preparations' for external quality audit and assessment (TQA). But there was relatively little support amongst front-line academics for the view that 'better teamwork' or 'improvements in quality for staff' had been made possible. Support for the view that 'improvements for students' had been achieved was also relatively low. In overall terms, the quantitative data showed that it was the adoption of improved quality assurance 'technology' that academics viewed as one of the most significant changes, with the quality system acting almost as a 'shield' to assist them in coping with external or internal quality assessment or monitoring. But the results also revealed a 'gap' between the views of front-line academics, the 'managed', and academic managers, with the former revealing markedly less 'positive' views of 'quality' or the quality system than the latter. Moreover, two of the six academic areas studied manifested particularly negative perceptions when compared to others. There was also a 'gap' between the views of external monitoring bodies, as judged by their published quality monitoring reports, and those of NewColl's staff, with the former viewing the systems more positively.

This general pattern was also confirmed by the results of the focus interviews completed during this phase of the research. The range of explanatory concepts developed there reinforces the earlier emphasis on the way in which the meaning of 'quality' had evolved

during the 1990s, and how academics perceived the various manifestations of the 'quality revolution' from within their own institutions. A brief recap on the ten themes derived from interviewing academics in that first phase serves to illustrate this.

- i) quality as 'ritualism' and 'tokenism'**
academics use procedures primarily to satisfy external requirements; quality enhancement becomes a residual feature of quality systems
- ii) quality as 'impression management'**
preparations for external assessment are carefully scripted and stage-managed
- iii) quality as a 'burden'**
quality is perceived as an 'add on'; part of an inspectorial compliance culture
- iv) quality as 'failure to close the loop'**
key service areas are usually excluded from the formal system for managing academic quality
- v) quality as 'suspicion of management motives'**
quality monitoring, externally or internally driven, viewed as an essentially managerial tool which threatens academic/professional autonomy
- vi) quality as 'discipline' and 'technology'**
academics perceive 'better systems' or 'improvements in quality assurance' as distinct from improvements in quality
- vii) quality as 'front-line staff resistance'**
implementation requires 'ownership', but staff respond in different ways with varying degrees of enthusiasm and support
- viii) quality as 'lack of mutual trust'**
systems emphasise responsibilities of front-line academics; perceived lack of reciprocal accountability
- ix) quality as a culture of 'getting by'**
academics constrained by lack of time; shift from 'resource-led' to 'improvement-led' culture associated by front-line staff with confusing demands.
- x) quality and 'constraints on team-work'**
quality emphasises 'teams'; staff report situational pressures preventing this

These themes are presented below in tabular form and, for the purpose of highlighting the contrast, are set alongside some of the prevailing formal conceptions and 'meanings' of quality of the early 1990s noted earlier:

| Dominant formal meanings of 'quality' in the early 1990s | Situated perceptions of 'quality' of front-line academics: from mid-1990s |
|---|--|
| • quality as 'perfection' or 'consistency' | • quality as 'failure to close the loop' |
| • quality as 'value for money' | • quality as 'burden' |
| • quality as 'total quality' | • quality as 'lack of mutual trust' |
| • quality as 'management commitment' | • quality as 'suspicion of management motives' |
| • quality as 'culture change' | • quality as a culture of 'getting by' |
| • quality as 'peer review' | • quality as 'impression management' and 'game-playing' |
| • quality as 'transforming the learner' | • quality and 'constraints on teamwork' |
| • quality as 'fitness for purpose' | • quality as 'discipline and technology' |
| • quality as 'exceptional' or 'excellence' | • quality as 'ritualism' and 'tokenism' |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| • quality as 'customer satisfaction' | • quality as 'front-line resistance' |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|

Table 1: illustrating contrasting meanings of quality

Demystifying quality: lessons learned from the 1990s

What these results, as expressed in the ten themes, has enabled me to do is to strip away and demystify the ideologically and politically loaded formal definitions of quality which were prevalent in the early 1990s, and to begin to reconstruct an alternative understanding of and perspective on 'quality' and 'quality policy' as implemented based on the situated perceptions of quality of front-line academics. Moreover, since the results are drawn from 'close-up' study of academics working with quality systems on a day to day basis, they provide valuable insights into academics 'coping' with quality. But before looking in more detail at academics' views of quality policy, quality systems, and quality monitoring, I shall first consider the principal lessons from this first phase of my research.

Firstly, quality is an 'essentially contested' issue, and there are competing voices and discourses; front-line academics and managers view 'quality' differently. So long as quality managers are wedded to forms of managerialism and accountability they remain hostages to fortune. They seek to influence the processes and rituals of external audit and assessment, and to manipulate the rules of the game, but in so doing they forfeit the prospect of engaging in innovative or quality enhancement-oriented work.

Secondly, though many aspire towards the notion of a 'blueprint', the lesson arrived at here is that there is no blueprint model for a quality assurance system to be drawn on by higher education institutions. As is argued later, when we look closely and in fine detail at academics engaging with quality systems, it quickly becomes apparent that the constraints of circumstance and context may serve to undermine or subvert an idealistic, blue-print driven approach to the operationalisation of any given definition of 'quality', or the implementation of any designed or preferred quality assurance system.

Thirdly, what is achievable with 'quality' in higher education should not be seen in terms of a 'blank sheet'. For example, even though the notions of 'quality as consistency' or 'quality as transformation' may be laudable the forces of context and circumstance impact on such aspirations.

Fourthly, a particularly important lesson to be drawn centres on the 'implementation gap': the difference between planned outcomes of policy, or preferred definitions, and the outcomes which emerge through the implementation process. In the context of my NewColl studies, the gap was between what was designed into and expected of the quality system - the desire to reconcile 'accountability' and 'improvement' - and what, at ground level, in a particular organisational context, prevented this from being achieved. By making use of ethnographic methods and a phenomenological perspective on policy implementation, I was able to highlight the importance of the views and perspectives of 'front-line' academic staff engaged in the implementation of policy, and to reveal them as 'makers' and 'shapers' in the policy implementation process, not mere passive recipients.

Fifth, the notion of 'context', or 'situatedness', already referred to, suggests that any given quality assurance definition or system, will always be affected by 'situational factors' and by 'context' and that in the process of development and implementation, 'quality policy' becomes changed and subverted. This leads to the view that the success in application of a system or definition may be dependent less on the rigour of application or the neatness or theoretical compactness of the 'dry', documented quality system per se, important though that may be, and more on its contingent use by actors, and on how the system is viewed and interpreted by them. It is suggested that, when associated with (or led by) management objectives - as systems in higher education in the 1990s most certainly appear to be - 'quality' appears as 'accountability' and 'managerialism' and that, at the operational level, 'quality' can only be properly understood relative to how actors - particularly 'front-line' actors - construe and construct 'quality' or 'the quality system'. This requires that close attention is paid to actors' subjectivities and how this influences how they 'cope' with, 'shape', or even 'subvert', quality policy.

5. Studying academics' responses to quality: the merits of an appreciative, contextualised perspective

In noting, earlier, Harvey's (1999) call for more critical, contextualist social research in the field of quality, and Smyth's (1995, p. 1) lament that *there are so few attempts to document what is happening to [higher education]*, by using an appreciative, contextualised perspective I have been highly conscious of the shortage of research into quality within specific organisational settings. This methodological and epistemological position is informed by what Matza (1969), in his studies in the sociology of deviancy, referred to as a *naturalistic perspective* which involves *the constant attempt to remain true to the phenomenon one is studying* (Taylor, Walton, and Young, 1973, p. 172). Moreover, it is *the attempt to give an accurate and truthful description of phenomena in their own right rather than to describe or explain them in order to correct...them*. This is in sharp contrast to most studies dealing with higher education policy, quality management, or the management of change in higher education completed during the 'quality revolution' of the 1990s which commonly reveal only views 'from the top'. Such managerialist underpinnings to the study of higher education have led to a somewhat partial and limited view of issues relating to change in higher education institutions (Weil; 1994; Slowey; 1995; Doherty 1995; HEQC, 1995). For the most part, studies in that tradition tend towards what Matza (1969, p. 15) would term a 'correctionalist' rather than an 'appreciative' position. With the exception of the work of Trowler (1998), there is a paucity of attempts to incorporate an appreciative focus on ground-level involvement in the implementation and shaping of policy.

I have referred in previous work to the merits of such 'close up' study and 'insider research' of academic institutions, and the richness it offers in studying the 'quality revolution'. It is:

able to pose questions and offer insights in a way that other approaches are not. It facilitates a full appreciation of the context and social reality being studied, and opens up a rich variety of data sources, including actors' views and subjectivities.
(Newton, 2000)

Appreciative, close-up study reveals much needed insights into issues around the implementation of quality policy, and how key actors receive and respond to policy and change in higher education organisations. In view of the emphasis placed in this paper on the pivotal role of front-line academics in efforts towards sustaining quality improvement and transformation of the learner (Harvey and Knight, 1996), such evidence about the work situations of ground-level staff is indispensable.

6. Academics coping with quality: adopting or adapting 'quality policy'?

Academics and policy: the discretion debate

Seeking to throw light on academics' responses to quality in higher education, and how they 'cope' with quality assurance mechanisms and monitoring regimes, prompts us to pose fundamental questions. How, for example, do staff engage with quality frameworks or policy emanating from national or institutional levels? What meanings do front-line staff attach to different facets of quality? Are they adopters of policy, or resisters, adapters, or makers and shapers of quality policy initiatives?

It is argued here that front-line staff do not mutely accept policy or the changes associated with it, and are not passive recipients of management objectives. This position is arrived at by rejecting the notion that 'academic culture' exists as a monolithic, monocultural entity guiding the behaviour, thoughts and actions of academics. The view taken is one in which culture is seen as *at least partly constructed on an ongoing basis by individuals and groups* (Trowler, 1998a, p 25). Moreover, as is evident from the discussion in the following section, where categorisations of types of behavioural response to quality policy are considered, I would concur with Trowler's assessment of the limitations of studies of academic culture, that:

Certainly the attitudes and values among academic staff with whom I had contact over the years were much more subtly diverse and unpredictable than those portrayed in the existing literature (p 17).

So, one aspect of looking closely at what academic staff do with policy is to be able to tap into this diversity of meanings and behaviours. Moreover, a significant feature of policy implementation is the discretion exercised at the point of implementation by 'front-line' workers, or 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1976; 1980; Prottas, 1978). The 'discretion debate' centres on the importance of discretionary behaviour and the need for professionals and bureaucrats, especially in personal service professions, to make judgements and to exercise discretion. For Prottas (1978), given their relative autonomy at the point of implementation, street-level bureaucrats are, despite controls on them, the real makers of policy since management effectively loses control to them. It can't enforce complete control because it can't specify the rules and responsibilities precisely enough. As Lipsky (1980, p 13) notes: *The policy-making roles of street-level bureaucrats are built on...relatively high degrees of discretion and relative autonomy from organisational authority.* He argues that street-level bureaucrats *can withhold cooperation* and strategies include *negative attitudes with implications for work (alienation, apathy)* (Lipsky (1980, p 17). Trowler (1997, p 20) concludes that:

These 'street-level bureaucrats'...play a crucial part in reacting to, interpreting and sometimes effectively changing policy at the point of implementation. We need to understand and take account of these processes in a more sophisticated way than we currently do.

In view of the predominance of 'managerialist' perspectives in higher education literature, it is not surprising that this dimension - the activities of the 'front-line academic' - is virtually absent from those studies. But two points are of particular interest at this juncture. Firstly, in that, as was argued earlier, there is a 'gap' between what is designed into a policy and situational factors which prevent policy intentions from being achieved, then precisely how policy is received and decoded by academics is of paramount importance. Secondly, what is of particular interest for present purposes is that, by stressing 'ownership' and 'self-assessment', national quality frameworks, or institutional quality systems, may actually run the risk of exacerbating the problem of discretion for management since there may be a problem of goal distortion or goal conflict. Discretion may be exercised inappropriately or idiosyncratically from the point of view of management, with a consequent distortion of official policy goals or intentions. Thus, even though some commentators point towards the widespread challenge to the authority and autonomy of academics, or the 'decline of donnish dominion' as Halsey (1992) terms it, nevertheless, as Middlehurst and Gordon (1995, p 280) observe:

Universities and colleges [are] organisations of professionals where the professionals (notably the academics) exercise high degrees of autonomy. They have considerable discretion over what and how they teach and over what and how they research.

Categorising types of behavioural response to quality policy

As Trowler (1998, p 50; 101) observes, a major difficulty with the literature on academic work is that there is very little sense of any resistance, innovation or rebellion from academic staff. In that much writing on quality management in higher education seeks to justify rather than problematise quality assurance systems, and since little attention is paid to the perspectives of 'front-line' actors engaged in implementation of policy, it remains the case that, as Doyle and Ponder (1977, p. 1) noted, *resistance continues to be treated as a practical difficulty of organisations that requires a remedy and not as a social phenomenon requiring systematic inquiry and explanation.* Accordingly, following the discussion earlier around the notion of 'dramaturgical performances', it is evident that there is much scope for studies which access

the *back-stage or under-the-stage responses* to policy implementation or *the implementation gap* (Trowler, 1998a, p 50).

Attempts to categorise the different groups of staff engaged in various aspects of organisational life, including policy implementation, are familiar in a number of areas of sociology, social policy and the literature on the management of change. There are also examples in studies of educational institutions. Doyle and Ponder (1977, p. 3), in their study of teacher reaction to change proposals, draw a distinction between three images of the teacher as represented in the change literature on schooling: *the rational adopter*, *the pragmatic sceptic*, and *the stone-age obstructionist* whom change strategies attempt to *neutralise or bypass* (p. 4). The HEQC's (1995) 'Managing for Quality' notes three types of individual reaction to policy change, *the keenie*, *the over-my-dead-body*, and, between the two, *the yes but*. Categorisations in the appreciative tradition of the sociology of deviance with potential for assisting the study of staff reactions to policy change include Goffman's (1973, pp 62-63) distinction between various lines of adaptation to the exigencies of organisational life such as *the intransigent line*, *colonization* and *conversion*. Sykes and Matza's (1957) notion of *techniques of neutralisation* might also facilitate exploration of staff resistance or deviance in terms of responses to the requirements of policy implementation. In his own work Trowler (1997; 1998, p 114) develops a categorisation of types of response to change at NewU associated with the introduction of the credit framework at that university. The four broad categories of response which he distils from his data are: *sinking*, *swimming*, *coping* and *reconstructing*. Echoing Lipsky's (1980, p 18) argument that street-level bureaucrats develop *coping mechanisms* which are *unsanctioned by managers of their agencies* (p 18), many academics in Trowler's study had developed coping strategies. For Trowler (1998a, p 126), the most interesting, and potentially the largest category, was that of *policy reconstruction*, discussed later, which refers to:

the processes academics engage in when they reinterpret and reconstruct policy on the ground, using strategies to effectively change the policy, sometimes resisting change, sometimes altering its direction.

He notes that *many academic staff engage in some aspect of policy reconstruction as well as developing coping strategies. In Mertonian terms they are either rebelling or innovating or both* (p 126). But, as he notes:

These categories are not mutually exclusive. Academics move from one category to another in their professional lives, reconstructing in some areas and using coping strategies in others, for example. The categories represent types of behavioural response, not types of academic (p. 113).

Trowler does acknowledge, however, that some academics *are firmly in one or other of these categories and have little contact with the others* (p. 113 - 114).

These findings accord well with those at each phase of my own research. As in Trowler's study (1998a, p 114), staff at NewColl were not *mutely accepting* change (McMurty, 1991, 216). Different staff in my study responded in different ways, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and support for quality policy. This is graphically illustrated by Respondent 11, a psychologist, who draws on Goffman's (1973) typology for categorising how mental patients adjust and adapt to the requirements of 'total institution', noted earlier:

Like what I'm reminded of is Goffman's conceptualisation ranging from the convert to the bloody intransigent. So you've got people here, and they truly worry me, who are actually converts. They actually believe - they've swallowed this hook, line and sinker. I think the majority of people here, as far as I understand them, are colonisers. You know, they go along with it more or less, and if you're like me you go along with it minimalistically. There are a few, a very few intransigents.

To provide some insights into how staff in my study responded in different ways, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and support for quality policy, I shall draw here on results from focus group interviews. For heuristic and illustrative purposes, selective use is also made of eight of the 'categorisations' developed, variously, by Goffman (1973), Doyle and Ponder (1977) and Trowler (1998a), noted earlier. They are:

- 'intransigent'
- 'colonised'
- 'convert'
- 'rational adapter'
- 'pragmatic sceptic'/'sceptic'
- 'sinking'
- 'coping'
- 'reconstructing'

'intransigent'

This category of behavioural response is illustrated by Respondent 11 who, in describing his minimalist approach to attendance at course and School meetings, asserted that:

I mean most meetings I go to I know the bloody answer before I walk through the door...I haven't got time for brainstorming. I just want to be in and out...I can't handle a system that expands the time to be spent on everything exponentially to this secret figure that's in the true believer's bloody head (11).

'colonised'

In contrast to Respondent 11, some respondents displayed attitudes which revealed the 'ritualistic' and 'tokenistic' status accorded to quality assurance mechanisms, procedures, and how they themselves had fallen in with the system. When pressed for views on the use of quality manuals, the role of action plans, and ownership of procedures, one exchange proceeded as follows:

Respondent 19:

It's not my stuff that sits on the shelf because it's not stuff I necessarily wanted to know...[NewColl] decided I need this action plan so therefore I create a few things that I need to do to keep the system running (19).

Researcher:

So it's just tokenism?

Respondent 19:

In my case, yeah, a bit (19).

Respondent 22:

I don't know if it's tokenism so much. I think people have fallen in with the system and they know that a system is needed but I don't think that there's that much ownership. They do it because they have to do it (22).

'convert'

Other respondents appeared to be more enthusiastically conforming, suggesting a degree of 'conversion' rather than mere 'compliance'. For example, one course leader, Respondent 32,

a senior lecturer in housing studies, and a relatively new member of staff with experience previously at a new university was more buoyant than most other respondents, perhaps even reflecting what Trowler (1998a, pp 119 - 122) characterises as the 'swimming' category:

At first I thought it appeared to be an additional burden but I think after two and a half years now of trying to incorporate it into what we do anyway, I find it a very useful discipline and you don't think of it as something separate now. You just do it (32).

This category of 'convert' reminds us that through the 1990s whole administrative structures and bureaucracies were established. As Respondent 11 pointed out:

There are careers in this system....[and] career-makers in the system...[That's] anyone who perceives a vested interest in any element of the system.

'rational adapter'

The basis for these sentiments also finds expression in the comments of Respondent 2, Vice Principal (Academic and Student Affairs) and Respondent 8, Head of Information and Student Services who revealed how, for senior managers, the quality system had been developed and adapted to bring about greater discipline and efficiency in key areas of activity in both strategic and day-to-day matters.

We are institutionally, I think, generally too slack, you know, as a business, and certainly within our service here we've just got an awful lot of sharpening up to do and I think NewColl's got a lot of sharpening up to do (8).

Similar values are encapsulated in the following observations of Respondent 2:

I believe that every organisation needs some form of discipline...and, if you like, the disciplines of the quality system, have been in a sense extremely helpful...That sense of discipline I don't think was here when I first came, in many many areas (2).

Such comments indicate that, for managers at least, much of the significance of the quality system lay in its adaptability in assisting in the process of instilling new discipline into the organisation. Shore and Robert's (1995) conception of higher education in terms of the 'panopticon paradigm', and of quality assessment as providing the 'disciplinary technology', provides a provocative reference point.

'the pragmatic sceptic' and 'the sceptic'

For Doyle and Ponder (1977, pp. 4 - 5), '*the pragmatic sceptic*' works, individualistically, around any *immediate contingencies*, approaching innovation with a *concrete and procedural* orientation. They noted that the teachers they studied were inclined to adapt rather than merely adopt innovative practice. The course leader for the BEd degree at NewColl (Respondent 29) illustrates this by highlighting the quality system's 'technology' and the consistency of procedure and process:

I mean I think yes, you've got consistency, more so now than we ever had previously, certainly, because you've got a framework to work to for one thing and I think certainly, from our point of view, we've probably got better at it as we've done more. Year by year we've practically improved things like the 'quality file' and the way in which we've used that and so on. Each year I think maybe we've improved on the process (29).

In similar vein, Respondent 24 saw improvement but in this case in terms of the system's contribution to external accountability:

We have gone a long way along the way...we got through all those quality audits and all the rest of it. We know we've got something that works (24).

However, 'the sceptic' element as a distinct category was also apparent in the same exchange, especially with regard to the issue of whether the system had led to improvements for students as opposed to just system improvements. Respondent 25, a course team member in the computer studies subject area, introduced an element of doubt as to whether there had been improvement in quality per se:

[The system] works in some respects but whether it works in terms of quality for the student - I have very grave doubts about that. It may be a system and it may be consistent and accountable and all these things, but whether it's of any benefit to the students I don't know (25).

This sceptical tone is not difficult to detect amongst other academic staff respondents engaged in 'front-line' activity who may not be at all sure that changes or improvements are directly attributable or reducible to having a quality system. In some cases improvements may have happened anyway. Respondent 19, for example, observes that:

I would suggest that although [Respondent 17] is saying in his School that teaching developments were related to quality, I would say that teaching development can still occur whether there's a quality system or not (19).

As Respondent 16, field leader for Architectural, Urban and Regional Studies, commented: *You can't confuse improvement with getting better at filling in the forms faster. We are getting better at filling in the forms (16).*

'sinking'

At NewColl, as elsewhere in UK higher education, a sharply reducing unit of resource, higher student-staff ratios, and attempts to secure a shift in emphasis from a 'resource-led' culture to a 'problem-solving', 'improvement-led' culture makes considerable demands on staff. Some staff at NewColl report an element of confusion and resignation in the face of such demands. In the following passage two course team members express this well:

Respondent 24:

And there are conflicting messages. I mean it's what's flavour of the month (24).

Respondent 25:

Research. No research. Lots of classes. Not so many classes. Income generation. Oh, forget that...get in the class and teach (25).

Respondent 24:

You know, you can have three different changes in a year can't you...I can't see any real care about what it's like to be a student or a teacher (24).

Similarly, Respondent 12 reflected that *It's [the] generation of paperwork which has created something of a problem*. This is confirmed by Respondent 14, a course leader in aeronautical engineering, whose own situation and work pressures alerts us to what Trowler (1998a, pp. 114 - 119) describes as the 'sinking' category:

I want to support what [Respondent 12] said. I mean the system itself, the idea is excellent and it's brought a lot of help...but it's just the workload that we've got now. I mean especially in our area where the number of students and that have

come in, it's just, I put all the stuff together for the end period...but the people below you, just like [Respondent 12] said, I mean they can't carry it out because there's no time to (14).

'coping'

This category shares with the 'sinking' category a strong sense of the 'burden' associated with quality monitoring, whatever its source, external or internal, particularly when set alongside the changed context of academic work. This is illustrated by Respondent 26:

I think there's also the feeling that however many times you weigh the pig, it doesn't get any fatter. There is an element there that, you know, no matter how much you put into this quality assurance system, at the end of the day the pig is getting thinner and thinner. You learn to work with less, in worse working conditions, and I think that does encourage you to think, well, do I really need to put so much energy and effort into this when we are working in, I think, decreasing working conditions and decreasing resources (26).

Such pressures as those referred to by Respondents 12, 14 and 26, may be compounded if quality-related activities are perceived as eroding the valuable time available to academics for what they regard as their core activities, whether it be teaching and assessment, or research. Implementing new approaches to quality may even be associated with declining quality. As the following exchange with Respondent 30, a chemist, indicates:

Respondent 30:

Obviously in my little area we seem to be running round like bears with sore heads most of the time...Well, there's never enough time in the day to do everything you want and if I'm honest I go through the quality systems and everything seems OK, but I know that the quality of my course is less than it was 5 years ago (30).

'reconstructing'

Other respondents exemplify how, by developing local practices, or creating their own space in which to operate procedures, or even engaging in Trowler's *policy reconstruction* (1996a, p. 26), staff may assert their autonomy by moving from 'passive' to 'active' mode. This may even be to the point of using their own and not NewColl's quality tools. Respondent 57, a course team member in art and design, noted that in her School a student forum was used for obtaining student feedback instead of official questionnaires. Respondent 25, a course team member in computing had also moved away from using 'official' feedback forms:

I find I get a better feedback from students...just by talking to them on an informal basis and from the course team meetings where there are student representatives rather than having them all fill in a form. If anything, from the form the only bits worth having are the bits at the bottom where it says 'any other comments'. The rest of it - I mean it may seem useful but really it isn't, and it is time consuming..., taking time out of class to get them to fill it in, 'cos if you just give it to them and send them away you don't get them back so you have to do them in class (25).

As illustrated, staff resistance and adaptation to quality assurance and monitoring arrangements can manifest itself in a number of ways. Nevertheless, it would appear that academics are by no means passive recipients of 'quality policy', or mere 'victims' in the policy process.

7. Academics' perceptions of emerging quality monitoring arrangements in the UK

As higher education institutions in the UK face new external quality and standards monitoring requirements from the national agency, the QAA, what future institutional changes are these

arrangements likely to trigger? Will they signal greater managerialism and further reductions in departmental autonomy, and will academic values become marginalised even further by market and employment-related values? More particularly, given the concerns of the present paper, how will the new arrangements impact on the front-line academic? In this section, to explore aspects of these questions, I draw on data gathered during a recent series of focus group interviews with academic staff at the research site, NewColl (April/May, 2001). These interviews were designed to tap 'views from below' on current external and internal quality requirements, and also emerging perceptions of engaging with the new QAA quality and standards framework from January, 2002, preparations for which are already under way in four subject areas at NewColl. In that this second phase of research is incomplete, with collection and analysis of data continuing, the observations and views offered here are at best tentative. Nevertheless, some initial reflections on pertinent issues arising in the context of this changing regulatory environment are apposite.

As Brennan (2001) notes, there are mixed views on emerging prospects. On the one hand, he suggests, it might be argued that greater emphasis in the new QAA framework on standards and the introduction of subject benchmarks, may effect a shift in authority and influence back towards disciplinary communities of academics, at both local and national level. This might mean that, even though front-line academics may still find their day-to-day situations constrained by the exigencies of quality monitoring, their reference point may become more oriented towards immediate and external subject peers than towards quality managers and administrators within it. In contrast, it may be argued that the introduction of programme specifications, and a plethora of new national codes of practice, and the requirement that departments make available to external reviewers a substantial evidence base, this is just as likely to continue to increase the dependency of academics upon administrative colleagues as 'interpreters' of regulations, codes of practice, and quality assurance guidelines, whether external or institutional. Moreover, the sharper focus within QAA institutional review procedures on institutions' degree awarding function is unlikely to reduce the already dominant profile and responsibilities of institutional committees and senior managers, and other manifestations of 'quality bureaucracy'.

Two of the themes emerging from recent NewColl data help to throw some light on the scenarios to which Brennan draws attention. Each suggests that, while there are considerable elements of continuity with the results and themes reported from the earlier phase of this research, nevertheless, those academics interviewed revealed a rather more beleaguered tone than those respondents interviewed at earlier stages of my research. The first theme suggests that quality continues to be perceived as 'bureaucracy', 'inspection', and 'intrusion'. In the second theme, quality is associated with various manifestations of 'conforming behaviour'.

Theme 1: quality as 'intrusion', 'inspection', and 'bureaucracy'

As universities have moved into the 21st century, new sources of internal and external intrusion into the work situation of academics are appearing. As universities endeavour to search for even greater efficiencies, and as external monitoring bodies become even more forensic in their scrutiny, then, arguably, it will become an organisational requirement that senior managers are carried more directly into the heart of the academic domain. For academics, this suggests increased tension between the local level of department - the point of maximum professional and academic autonomy in terms of curriculum delivery, design, and standards - and the corporate requirement that the 'product' should meet both institutional targets and external monitoring requirements. This scenario, and the changes which it signals, is unsettling and threatening for 'front-line' academics and also makes traditional tensions between 'the professional' and 'the corporation', and between 'accountability' and 'quality improvement', increasingly difficult to resolve. Respondent A, in describing the impact of external monitoring arrangements - what he terms *policing mechanisms* - on the role and functions of the lecturer, reflects that:

I came into lecturing to engage with ideas, discourse and people, I didn't come into lecturing to engage with systems, although I'm not so stupid and asociological not to realise that systems are everywhere. But certainly, personally, the way in which systems have become much more, you know, bureaucratic, in that sociological, Weberian sense - you know, they've got immanent, inherent logic -

then the experiences I have with them I find oppressive...because it inhibits my relative autonomy...as a professional.

Nor is this front-line academic alone in his negative assessment of the impact of quality regimes. Alan Ryan, Warden of New College, Oxford, was quite unequivocal in a recent item in the Times Higher (Ryan, 2001) arguing [view from the top] that *the QAA damages what it is meant to improve* since:

Taking a department's mind off the real tasks of the department reduces higher education to the condition of Soviet tractor production. The object, in the latter case, ceased to be the production of tractors and became the creation of factories that matched the demands of visiting party bosses on the day they visited; the object in higher education has become the production of set-piece classes, implausibly tidy paperwork, and lecture outlines that are within the comprehension of a two-year-old.

This dimension of academics' attention being diverted away from departmental and teaching-related priorities by external and internal quality arrangements, is taken up by Respondent G, a biologist, who brought to bear what for him was a somewhat unfavourable comparison with his previous academic position at a New Zealand university:

I have less time now to work on my subject area because there seems to be...alot more paperwork...and as a result of that I don't think that my own teaching is as up-to-date as it used to be. I don't think it's perhaps as innovative.

But for Johnson (1994, p. 379) this set of circumstances is hardly surprising:

It no longer really matters how well an academic teaches and whether or not he or she sometimes inspires their pupils; it is far more important that they have produced plans for their courses, bibliographies, outlines of this, that and the other, in short all the paraphernalia of futile bureaucratisation required for assessors who come from on high like emissaries from Kafka's castle.

This in turn effectively encapsulates the experience of Respondent B, a science lecturer in the School of Education, who not only confirms what Johnson describes, but also alludes to the likelihood that his own innovative practice in making routine use of web-based teaching may not be a pedagogic format which teacher education inspectors will value:

We have an inspection in teacher education coming up...I'm expected to have copies of all my lecture notes. I don't use lecture notes so that's difficult. Anyway, I have to provide the inspectors [with] copies of all my handouts, and they change on a weekly or annual basis depending on my mood, and they want copies of all the assessments and also the assessment criteria. Basically they want a log book and this log book is forcing me into almost robotic behaviour. You know, what are my [intended] learning outcomes for week seven, semester one?

In the same exchange, Respondent G again asserts his sense of frustration at how his responsibilities and tasks as a lecturer are being devalued through having to cope with the exigencies of external monitoring routines:

What I am against is that sort of level of detail that [Respondent B] is going to have to produce in terms of evidence, because that destroys all the good will that I have, because it is incompatible with the way I do my day-to-day life as a lecturer.

But it is precisely the need to *serve the exercise with evidence*, as one of my informants who had been involved in trialling the new QAA framework at another college, expressed it, which created a deep sense of confusion and exhaustion in some of my NewColl respondents. For Shore and Wright (2000, p. 72):

The result has been the invention of a host of 'auditable structures' and paper

trails to demonstrate 'evidence of system' to visiting inspectors.

Also, echoing the earlier observations of Respondents B and G, as Shore and Wright argue:

The meaning of 'teaching quality' has...been transformed by the audit process...To be audited, the learning experience must now be quantified and standardised so that it can be measured (p. 73).

But Respondent C, an engineer currently looking ahead to a subject review under the QAA's new method, in lamenting that *the goalposts seem to be continually moving*, notes that from his point of view the invasiveness of external monitoring is seemingly limitless: *the question is really, where are the boundaries...they just seem to be growing all the time*. He points out that his own colleagues *don't know what's expected of them next, there's always something more coming along...it's not so much the burden, it's just knowing whether you've done enough or whether there's more to be done, and so on. There's that feeling of the unknown*.

Theme 2: quality as 'conformist behaviour'

In seeking to establish how academics will confront the new QAA method for reviewing quality and standards, when they are, as Shore and Wright (2000, p. 58) express it, *inside and therefore subject to the disciplines of the new regime* it is instructive to note that various commentators have confirmed that quality monitoring continues to ensure that the *energy and ingenuity* of academic staff in UK higher education remains *focused on how to get a good 'result' from whatever quality assurance process they face* (Brennan, 2001, p. 1). One Vice Chancellor, whose university was recently engaged in, or preparing for, 11 inspections confirms that, in preparations for QAA subject review, it continues to remain *normal to paint corridors and buy additional books and computers* (Floud, 2001) in order to achieve the kind of *enhanced performance which is of a very different kind to that intended by government and [the funding councils]* (Shore and Wright, 2000, p. 72). The pressure to adopt conformist patterns of behaviour was reported by several of my respondents. As Respondent B observed:

We've got an inspection coming up. Oh, all of a sudden 'there is some money, go and spend it on books'. You know, that happened five years ago when we had an inspection (B).

As he then went on to observe, *you spend alot of time creating smoke screens* (Respondent B). Respondent D also alluded to resource-related factors which acted as a pressure on her:

As it is now, because I'm answerable to external professional bodies, I tend to cover up minor inconsistencies in quality because I know they won't be dealt with.

Other respondents referred, variously, to not taking risks or *an element of fear about owning up to problems since there is no reward for owning up to mistakes*. This even extends to committee minutes being re-worded *so that it doesn't trigger a response* (Respondent E). The pressure of anticipating that the future of the college may be vulnerable in the event of adverse judgements by the QAA and other external bodies is a very real one for academic staff since *one area of unsatisfactory, if you actually admit to it, will then damage the future of the entire institution and that is an enormous pressure* (Respondent G). Also, as Respondent F, programme leader for initial teacher training courses commented:

If you've got [the inspectors] breathing down your neck then that will determine how many students you're allocated in terms of the course, because the [student] numbers are capped. That focuses the mind nicely.

As Shore and Wright (2000, p. 72) observe:

'Careless talk costs money' is an apt motto for the new ethos of caution and careful preparation.

8. Conclusions and implications

An important message of the paper is that there are considerable merits in close-up study and insider research into 'views from below', and that there is scope for much wider application in a variety of higher education contexts and work environments.

The paper also serves to remind advocates of transformative concepts of quality, such as Harvey and Knight (1996) who emphasise the desirability of 'quality enhancement' and 'continuous quality improvement', that it is advisable to take full account of the constraints and circumstances of situation and context which influence both policy implementation and the activities of key actors or 'system-users' in changing or re-shaping quality policy. By focusing on a particular work environment, the research reported on here has revealed much needed insights into issues around the implementation of quality policy, whether nationally or institutionally driven, and how key actors receive and respond to policy and change in higher education organisations.

The findings provide evidence that staff, especially front-line academics, do not mutely accept change or the particular demands of quality assurance policy or systems. Policy implementation is complex and uneven. Through their own interpretative work actors attach meaning to the various aspects of the quality system as they interact with it. They are not passive recipients of management objectives. Academic staff, in common with all actors involved, are 'makers' and 'shapers' of policy. They respond, adapt to or even resist and, while this may be patterned, it is not uniform. Accordingly, there is a need to focus on what academics think and do, and what meanings they attach to the different facets of policy, and how they work, change or even 'work around' policy (Trowler, 1998a). Following Giddens' work on 'structuration' (Giddens, 1984; 1991) this lends weight to the argument, put forward elsewhere (Newton, 1999b), that 'quality' acts as a 'modality' through which 'structure' - the quality system and quality policy - can be understood by actors. This in turn reveals the importance of gaining access to 'local practices' and to the 'back stage' and 'under the stage' responses to policy implementation (Trowler, 1998a). As has been illustrated, the ways in which academics respond to policy, and the strategies used, are varied. What is beyond doubt is that they are 'active' not 'passive' participants in the policy process.

From a UK perspective, it is particularly timely and pertinent to note the lessons of the research reported on here, given the implementation by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education of its new 'Quality Framework' in UK universities. This framework, which extends the focus of external scrutiny to both quality and standards, shows signs of being far more invasive and forensic than anything which has preceded it. Indeed, it is by no means clear how far quality monitoring bodies themselves acknowledge the complexities of higher education policy implementation, or the management of quality and standards. Given that my research reveals that 'quality policy' becomes changed in the implementation process, that 'quality' may become preoccupied with accountability rather than improvement and enhancement, and that, given the influence of context, there is no 'blueprint' or ideal model for a quality system or for policy implementation, then how the academic community, at various levels, responds to these new monitoring arrangements will continue to demand the close attention not only of researchers but of national quality bodies also.

Author's note

Details of the study institution, the respondents, and other non-essential details, have been changed in the interests of protecting the anonymity of the institution and the individuals concerned.

References

Becher, T. (1989) *Academic tribes and territories: intellectual enquiry and the cultures of disciplines*. Buckingham, SRHE/Open University Press

Brennan, J. Frederiks, M. and Shah, T. (1997) *Improving the quality of education: the impact of quality assessment on institutions*. London, QSC/HEFCE

Brennan, J (2001) Roles and responsibilities in quality assurance: institutions, departments, and individual staff, *Higher Education Digest*. Issue 39, London, Centre for Higher Education Research and Information

de Vries, P. (1997) Self-assessment within the quality assessment process: a critical perspective, in Radford, J. Raaheim, K. de Vries, P. and Williams, R. *Quantity and quality in higher education*. Higher Education Policy Series 40, London, Jessica Kingsley

Doherty, G. ed. (1995) *Developing quality systems in higher education*. London, Routledge

Doyle, W. and Ponder, G. A. (1977), The practicality ethic in teacher decision-making, *Interchange*. Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 1 - 12

Floud, R. (2001) 'Universities are sinking under inspection load', *Times Higher*, 23 March

Giddens, A. (1984) *The constitution of society*. Cambridge, Polity Press

Giddens, A. (1991) Structuration theory: past, present and future, in Bryant, C. and Jary, D. (eds) *Giddens' theory of structuration*. London, Routledge

Goffman, E. (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London, Allen Lane

Goffman, E. (1973) *Asylums*. London, Penguin Books,

Graham, J. (2000) 'The English Patient', presentation at a one-day conference organised by the University of Wales Education Subject Panel, Gregynog, Powys, 20 October

Halsey, A. H. (1992) *The decline of donnish dominion*. Oxford, Oxford University Press

Harvey, L. and Green, D. (1993) Defining quality, *Assessment and evaluation in higher education*, Vol.18, No.1 pp 9 - 34

Harvey, L. and Knight, P. (1996) *Transforming higher education*. Buckingham, SRHE/OU Press

Harvey, L. (1999) Evaluating the evaluators, Opening Keynote Address, Fifth Biennial Conference, International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, Santiago, Chile, May, 1999

Henkel, M. (2000) *Academic identities and policy change in higher education*. Higher Education Policy 46, London, Jessica Kingsley

HEQC (1995) *Managing for quality: stories and strategies - a case study resource for academic leaders and managers*. London, Higher Education Quality Council

Johnson, N. (1994) 'Dons in decline', in, *Twentieth Century British History*. Vol. 5. No.3, pp. 370-85

Lipsky, M. (1976) Toward a theory of street level bureaucracy, in Hawley, W. D. and Lipsky, M. (eds.) *Theoretical perspectives on urban policy*. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall

Lipsky, M. (1980) *Street level bureaucracy: dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Beverley Hills, Sage

Matza, D. (1969) *Becoming Deviant*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ., Prentice Hall

McMurty, J. (1991) Education and the market model, *Journal of philosophy of education*. Vol. 25, No. 2: pp. 209-218

- McNay, I. (1995) From collegial academy to corporate enterprise: the changing cultures of universities, in Schuller, T. (ed). *The changing university*. Buckingham, SRHE/OUP
- Middlehurst, R. and Gordon, G. (1995), Leadership, quality and institutional effectiveness, *Higher education quarterly*. Vol. 49, No. 3, pp. 267 - 285
- Middlehurst, R. (1993) *Leading academics*. Buckingham, SRHE/OU Press
- NCIHE (1997) Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 'Dearing Review'. London, HMSO
- Newton, J. (1999a) External quality monitoring in Wales (1993-1998): an evaluation of the impact on a higher education college, *Assessment and evaluation in higher education*. Volume 24, No.2
- Newton, J (1999b) Implementing quality assurance policy in a higher education college: exploring the tension between the views of 'managers' and 'managed', in Fourie, M., Strydom, A.H., and Stetar, J. *Reconstructing quality assurance: programme assessment and accreditation*. Bloemfontein, University of the Free State Press
- Newton, J. (2000) Feeding the beast or improving quality?: academics' perceptions of quality assurance and quality monitoring. *Quality in higher education*, Vol. 6, no. 2, pp 153 - 162
- Parker, H. (1974) *View from the boys*. London, David and Charles
- Power, M. (1994) *The audit explosion*. London. Demos
- Prottas, N. (1978) The power of the street level bureaucrat, *Urban Affairs Quarterly*. Vol. 13, No. 3
- Ryan, A. (2001) 'Stalin had to die too', *Times Higher*, 30, March
- Shore, C. and Roberts, S. (1995) Higher education and the panopticon paradigm: quality assessment as 'disciplinary technology', *Higher education review*. 27 (3), pp 8 - 17
- Shore, C. and Wright, S. Coercive accountability: the rise of audit culture in higher education, in, Strathem, M. ed.,(2000) *Audit cultures*. London, Routledge
- Slowey, M. (1995) Reflections on change: academics in leadership roles, in Slowey, M. ed. *Implementing change from within universities and colleges: 10 personal accounts*. London, Kogan Page
- Smyth, J. ed. (1995), *Academic work: the changing labour process in higher education*. Buckingham, SRHE/Open University Press
- Sykes, G. and Matza, D. (1957) Techniques of neutralisation, *American Sociological Review*, 22, December, pp. 664 - 670
- Taylor, I. Walton, P. and Young, J. (1973) *The new criminology*. London, Routledge
- THES (2001) Worthy project or just a game?, *The Times Higher*, 30 March, 2001
- Trow, M. (1994) *Managerialism and the academic profession: quality and control*. QSC Higher education report no. 2, London, Quality Support Centre

- Trowler, P. (1995) Academics' responses to credit-based modularity in an expanding HE system, in Jackson, N. ed. *Modular higher education in the UK in focus*. London, HEQC
- Trowler, P. (1997) Beyond the Robbins trap: reconceptualising academic responses to change in higher education (or...Quiet Flows the Don), *Studies in higher education* Volume 2, No. 3, 1997
- Trowler, P. (1998a) *Academics responding to change: new higher education frameworks and academic cultures*. Buckingham, SRHE/OU Press
- Trowler, P. (1998b) *Education policy: a policy sociology approach*. Eastbourne, Gildredge Press
- Underwood, S. (1998) Quality assessment: some observations, *Perspectives*. Volume 2, No. 2, Summer 1998, pp. 50 - 55
- Webb, A. (1994) Two tales from a reluctant manager, in Weil, S. ed. *Introducing change from the top in universities and colleges: 10 personal accounts*. London, Kogan Page
- Weil, S. (1994) Management and change in colleges and universities: the need for new understandings, in Weil S ed. *Implementing change from the top in universities and colleges: 10 personal accounts*. London, Kogan Page
- Williams, G. (1988) Experimentation in reflective practice: a conceptual framework for managers in highly professionalised organisations, presented at the annual conference of the British Academy of Management, Cardiff, 19 September 1988
- Williams, R. (1976) *Keywords*. London, Fontana