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Academic staff and the process of subject review: some experiential qualitative accounts from ‘backstage’ and ‘under the stage’

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Abstract

This proposal is submitted under the heading of *Has external quality review had its day* and is a report of work in progress. It follows from work by Newton (2000) and Henkel (2000 a and 2000b) looking at academic staff perceptions of the process of Quality Assurance Agency subject review in the United Kingdom. It reports on research on qualitative experiential accounts of subject review by academic staff. Three groups of staff have been interviewed, one group on the run-up to subject review, another group after one year and a third group after three years. In total 19 people have been interviewed and the interviews are being analysed using a modified form of grounded theory. The paper will outline the debate on subject review, the theoretical background to the research and some preliminary findings.

Context

In the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) undertakes a process of subject review of teaching and learning in higher education, known as teaching quality assessment (TQA). In addition there is academic audit of institutions and the research assessment exercise.

TQA has its critics who see little good in it but there are those who regard it with more ambivalence. While there is an assumption at national policy level that there is a truth that can be measured, the emerging debate indicates the complexities and tensions in the issue. Strathern (1997) argues that TQA is part of a system that conflates measuring with target setting and individuals with institutions. Institutions are measured by the TQA and, therefore, assess themselves against prescriptive models of effectiveness. Thus, they banish any possibility of multiple identities and associated genuine reflexivity. Instead this is replaced with a concern with performativity.

Barrow (1999) argues that quality management is an instrument of governmentality to ensure surveillance but the unintended consequence has been Goffman's notions of 'dramaturgical compliance'. The systems are used, and complied with, but the sum of this compliance does not achieve the outcomes originally set for the project. In contrast Hodson and Thomas (1999), while recognising the role of performance as well as passive compliance and resistance, argue that accountability can lead to a culture shift in relation to quality. Luke (1997, p. 433) provides more detail by identifying the possibility of the opening up of space for previously marginalised groups such as women, since the process encourages 'a panoptic mechanism of making visible'. It thus

There is an emerging interest (Newton 2000; Henkel 2000a, 2000b) in the perceptions and views of the process of those who are the main focus as auditees — the academic staff in the curriculum area being reviewed. This connects with work on academic identities in this area. The research, that I am reporting, analyses both positive and negative perceptions of subject review and seeks an understanding of how it operates in private as well as public: back stage and under the stage as well as front stage (Goffman 1971), drawing out ambiguities in the process. While the focus has been mainly on the public operation of subject review, even those with most invested in the system are beginning to realise that there are unintended consequences. A recent HEFCE report (HEFCE 2000) states in the area of external accountability requirements:

In addition to the direct and indirect costs, which are generally not measured or planned, we found widespread evidence of inappropriate behavioural responses and other intangible costs. (HEFCE, 2000 p. 6)

The Research

The data was collected through interviews with academic staff, at a London college, as they are about to go through subject review or who have been through the process in the last four years. The study examines subject review through the eyes of these staff. The methodology used in this research aims to capture multiple perspectives and allow the participants to give an account of their world as they see it. The aim is to present a picture of how the college operates in a particular situation and process through the eyes of staff who are intimately connected with this process. Several theoretical perspectives are used. These include policy implementation theory, structuration theory, a micro-political perspective, theories of performativity and fabrication, teachers' concepts of time and perspectives from new public management theory.

This research position assumes that the world of higher education is potentially and actually a site of conflict between competing interests, that social divisions based on material interests and values lead to this conflict in organisations and that these in turn arise from wider social divisions in society based on concepts of capital accumulation (Bourdieu 1997) and other forms of 'social closure' (Parkin 1971).

However, this is not based on a determinist view of structure in society and, therefore, in organisations. It is argued that the role of agency and structure can both act as a constraint on the participant or an opportunity and that the participant can affect the structure both in intended and unintended ways (Giddens, 1979; Mortimore, 1997) I recognise the relationship between participant and structure is always located in time and space and is essentially dialectical (Giddens 1979).

Participants' motivation is viewed from a micro-political perspective using, as a model, Ball's (1991, p. 168) work on school teachers and the analysis of three 'levels of engagement among the staff in the processes of debate and struggle'. These were material interests, personal identity interests and an ideological dimension.

In addition, the study examines whether or not academic staff perception of subject review varies according to the amount of time that has elapsed since the subject review at the point of data collection and whether perception varies by subject area and hierarchical level within the organisation.

The aim is to produce 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of how the process of subject review is perceived. The research has:

an analytical concern with education as a political process and the concomitant empirical interest in those conflicts which occur between groups and

individuals who seek to define ‘what is to count as education’ in their own terms. (Ball 1991, p. 166)

There is no claim to a representative sample. The sample includes, in each grouping, a senior manager, someone who was (or was likely to be) observed teaching, the organiser of the work sample, someone who sat (or would sit) on aspect panels and someone heavily involved in producing the documentation. The sample aimed to include those both supportive and hostile to the process based on my knowledge of staff and their views. The basic theoretical position underpinning the data analysis is grounded theory (Glasser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998.) My position is based more on later grounded theory literature, which recognises the relevance of building on existing theory, thus the initial starting points for the teacher analysis are the theoretical ideas outlined above. However no attempt has been made to restrict emerging patterns to pre-existing concepts.

In particular the study explores, first, the extent to which the perceptions of the process of subject review (including the preparation for the event):

- compares to interviewees’ own views on how to assess quality;
- is perceived as a process which encourages honest reflection or is an exercise in impression management;
- is perceived as a process in which individuals or groups, engage, are passively compliant or resist;
- creates or inhibits space and opportunity for change — and for whom;
- affects their personal working lives individually and collectively.

Second the research explores the extent to which the process is regarded as having had, or is likely to have, a long term impact on:

- the student learning experience;
- management style;
- the work of staff;
- the working lives of staff individually and collectively.

Third, it explores concepts of time reflected in staff use of the discourse of time.

Initial analysis of interviews indicate the following broad themes. First, there is an emerging concept of acceptable accountability, the principle and the practice, which relates to the vocational background of staff, their attitude to academic autonomy and a critique of the snapshot approach. A second key theme is one of visibility/invisibility. This takes many forms:

- those on the margins being brought into the picture;
- being visible to senior staff;
- making ‘the big picture’ more visible to junior staff;
- visibility as ‘in the frame’ – performance on an aspect group;
- visibility/invisibility of students in the process;
- post-QAA return to invisibility – consequences for departments;
- post-QAA return to invisibility – how staff feel;
- dealing with QAA by keeping a low profile;
- making implicit systems explicit.

The third theme to emerge is one of resentment as a response. This can take the form of resentment against the system, against immediate managers, against senior management or against colleagues. Related to this is a fourth theme of power and powerlessness, how it operates at all levels and the associated discourse. Fifth, there is the theme of subject review as bureaucracy, in particular the additional work of making systems explicit and the related issues of ‘fabrication’. Finally there are themes related to quality of life issues such as time and stress and effects on family commitments