

'I want something better for my children'. A study of the 'experimental capital' of First generation mature students in HE (0050)

Julia Hope

University of Kent, UK

This paper considers the rise of neoliberalism and how quality assurance (QA) has emerged as a mechanism to enact a neoliberal ideology in UK Higher Education and discusses the dynamic interaction between QA and HE through the use of Harvey & Green's (1993) conceptions of quality. These concepts are used to interrogate the compliance proposed by the funding bodies in October 2014, and discusses the broad proposals following phase one of the review published in June 2015. This system may lead to an over-reliance on provider's absolute outputs and ignore a transformative approach to quality. Policy, regulation, and procedural requirements are neither inconsequential or benign. Instead they shape what HE is, it is important that academics be mindful of the policy and regulatory landscapes that surround and inhabit them.

Assuring quality in HE is not new. The quality of HE was traditionally embedded in peer review mechanisms such as the External Examiner system (Morley, 2003). From this perspective quality in HE was seen as context dependent and the meaning of quality could differ between contexts. However over the last three decades the meaning of quality has transformed from context dependent, internal activity of HEIs based within peer review and external examiner systems to a regulatory mechanism based on externally derived standards and mechanisms (Harvey, 2005).

The emergence of QA as an explicit, measurable evaluation and assurance process is a distinctive feature of the last three decades, coinciding with changes in HE and the social context in which HE operates (Harvey, 2005; Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). Neoliberalism is not a unified notion, but a multiplicity of possibilities and constraints, devised (though somewhat abstractly) globally but playing out locally (Peck & Tickell, 2002; Larner, 2003). Neoliberalism is a form of interventionism that seeks to pursue elite/corporate interests. This means the construction of market rationality. Both neoliberalism and QA are areas of ambiguity, Clarke (2008) argues that the concept of neoliberalism has been stretched too far to be productive as a critical analytical tool and many studies of QA in HE have been anodyne, descriptive (Blackmur, 2010) and lamented by Harvey & Newton (2007) as largely devoid of theoretical sophistication. Although these limitations bring with them a number of issues, it is clear that the governance of HE is an arena hosting a continuing struggle for the control of high-status knowledge through the functions of standard setting, evaluation and intervention (Slater & Tapper, 2000).

In a letter to UK universities' Vice Chancellors' in June 2015 (Aktins, 2015) summarised 7 proposed principles for a future QA system. The 1st proposal states that future QA systems should 'build on the fundamental principles of institutional autonomy and co-regulation.' Atkins, (2015) elaborates in that future QA systems should promote an enhanced role for providers' internal assistance systems, where governing bodies confirm that their senates are reviewing the quality of their students' academic experience and academic output standards, and that appropriate action plans are in place to improve or maintain quality. The rise of neoliberalism has influenced the structure of HE and acted as a catalyst for QA mechanisms. Regulation acts as an interface between the State and HE. QA is used is within HE discourses and practices as a tool to manage this interface. The rise of neoliberalism has undoubtedly influenced the structure of HE and acted as a catalyst for QA mechanisms. In order to anticipate the role that QA might play in the future, it is important to explore how quality has become conceptualised under neoliberalism.

There are widely differing conceptualisations of quality in use (Schuller, 1991) and evolution of quality in HE has led to a number of additional nuances to the essentialist and status definitions of quality. Harvey & Green (1993) identify 5 discrete but interrelated way of thinking about quality: Quality as *exceptional*, as *perfection*, as *fitness for purpose*, as *value for money* and as *transformation*.

Harvey & Green's (1993) first conceptualisation postulates quality as something exceptional. Three variations are highlighted:

- 1) A traditional notion that quality is distinctive with the implication of exclusivity (Pfeffer & Coote, 1991)
- 2) Quality is epitomised by excellence in that it exceeds very high standards
- 3) A weaker notion of exceptional in that quality passes a set of required minimum standards.

The traditional notion of quality is associated with distinctiveness and exclusivity but without offering benchmarks against which measurements can take place. Quality is seen as apodictic<sup>1</sup> and no attempt is made to define it. It is therefore not a concept that has been adopted by the QAA through its Higher Education Review arrangements as providers are now audited against a set of prescribed expectations set out in the UK Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). In addition, QAA publish benchmark statements and qualification descriptors that should be used by providers when

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1 expressing or of the nature of necessary truth or absolute certainty

designing curricular. However, despite these published expectations, Pfeffer & Coote, (1991) argue that the traditional notion of quality and Harvey (2006) highlights that it is a major indicator in the construction of provider rankings or league tables.

It is evident that there exists significant breadth across the 3 variations of Harvey & Green's (1993) quality as exceptional conceptualisation. However, within all 3 variations lies an issue with measurement. The apodictic traditional approach offers no foundation for measuring quality and although the excellence 1 and minimum standards notions advocate prescribed benchmarks, both raise the debate as to whether HE is an appropriate setting for applying essentially a form of quality control. Taylor (1981:16) raised quality measurement concerns shortly after the inception of neoliberalism in HE and warned 'what look like superficially attractive analogies can turn out to be dangerous metaphors, which work to re-describe the phenomena of education in terms that are not educational at all.' The government's agenda is clearly steering in this direction as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) will focus on an absolutist measure of quality, through the monitoring and assessing of the quality of teaching in English universities through a set of outcome focused criteria and metrics. This framework will go beyond notions of meeting minimum standards (excellence 3) as high-quality teaching will be linked to financial incentives.

Excellence 2 does not only concern consistency in conforming to specification but embodies a prevention rather than inspection philosophy (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Fundamental is ensuring that providers' processes are fault free at each stage, rather than awaiting the result of a general inspection. Although there have been many variations on government audit, assessment and review since the introduction of sector-wide QA in 1992, all variants have been principally concerned with the consistency inaccurate record keeping and reliability of administrative processes, rather than academic standards. The assurance of consistency in academic areas such as assessment and feedback lies with staff and students, although autonomy may be reduced following the implementation of the TEF. Excellent 2 could be described in HE nomenclature as engendering a 'quality culture' and is enacted by placing the onus on all staff to maximise the quality of their processes and, in turn, outputs.

Debates surrounding external regulation verses institutional autonomy have long been at the forefront of policy development concerning QA. In *Future approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (HEfCE, 2015), the proposals attempt to address perceived erosion in the sector of providers' independence and academic freedom that the formation of QAA initiated and follows Brown's (2015) call for increased institutional autonomy. Future QA systems it states should 'put the focus firmly on student outcomes and academic output standards rather than

systems and processes' with a 'focus on information and data'. It seems the former proposal alludes to quality as *perfection* and the latter to quality as *exceptional*, focusing on provider autonomy and responsibility for quality improvement, which has been widely linked to the creation of a quality culture (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010), with an emphasis on outputs. This is a significant shift from the current QAA Higher Education Review where process standards are measured over outcome standards.

The HEfCE (2015) proposals link to excellence 1 notions of 'student outcomes' and 'academic output standards' with a process driven excellence 2 framework, providers will inevitably strive for zero defects and 'getting it right first time' (Harvey & Green: 16) , or else risk negative consequences through poor outcomes in relation to provider or government targets. Despite positive rhetoric of institutional autonomy, co-regulation, improvement in the context of the provider and a proportionate approach to minimise the burden to providers, quality is conceptualised by Harvey & Green's (1993) quality as exceptional and quality as fit for purpose. If the current trajectory of HE is maintained, it seems that market-based policies will continue to be the main influence in the shape of HE with an increase in private providers only bolstering the nation of education for profit and economic gain.

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