

The Emptiness of Quality: A comparative discourse analysis of two reforms in Norwegian Higher Education (0166)

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Managerial concepts go in and out of fashion on the global public sector scene (Abrahamson, 1996; Pollitt, 1995), but in the realm of higher education (HE) the concept of quality has always been in vogue (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Stensaker, 2007). As a result, there has been an intense emphasis on quality, from policymakers (The European Commission, 2016), among HE professionals (Hyde, Clarke, & Drennan, 2013), and as a result of the former two, among researchers (Harvey & Williams, 2010). The question therefore lingers, what more is there to write about? In this paper we attempt to apply a different perspective on the quality discourse. Using Wittgenstein's concept of nonsensical statements, quality can be seen as an empty term; not holding any real meaning, being as broad and illusive as the words "good", "well" or "fine" (Grelland, 2011). However, the term has kept its potency as a signifier of necessary change, being applied by policymakers to induce notions of mediocrity in current affairs, and at the same time proposing a panacea.

To illustrate how the concept of quality has significantly changed its contents over the course of fifteen years, we will conduct a case study using discourse analysis (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) of two different reforms in the Norwegian HE. The reforms are separated by fifteen years, and by thematic differences, but they share an overarching emphasis on quality. The first case study analyzes the 2003 *Quality Reform*; a result of Norway's involvement in the early years of the Bologna process. In this reform, the term quality was used as a discursive catalyst for implementing classical New Public Management (NPM)-flavored concepts like customer (student) emphasis, results-based management (Hansen, 2013) and a funding system "clearly consistent with NPM policies" (Bleiklie, Enders, Lepori, & Musselin, 2011, p. 168). The second case study is analyzing developments in 2016. Currently, Norwegian HE officials are conceiving a new reform on quality, with preliminary public documents published, official hearings in progress and a public debate is sparked. Post-NPM themes like collaboration, mergers and robustness (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2011) have been introduced, in addition to an emphasis on the student as partaking in the academic community.

Example discourse: Student as customer vs student as academic

To provide an example of how the concept of quality changes between the two reforms we will examine two different discursive practices:

- the student as customer in the 2003 Quality reform, and
- the student as partaking in the academic community in the 2016 reform.

We will examine how the two practices relate to each other, how they differ, and whether the introduction of new elements in the 2016 reform really challenges the 2004 perception of the student as customer, or if this notion still is part of the dominant discursive practice.

One of the key missions of NPM was to challenge the dominance of professional power bases on behalf of the customer (Newman, 2011). The 2003 Quality reform took significant steps in giving influence to students, both directly through mandatory evaluations, and indirectly through a

strengthening of student rights. The standardization of study programmes and teaching models that came as a result of the adaptation to what later became the standards of the European Higher Education Area gave additional strength to student dominance and eventually reduced the autonomy of academics (Hyde et al., 2013).

However, in the discursive practice of the 2016 quality reform, the one-sided emphasis on student influence has shifted. Students are no longer passive recipients of commodities (Shumar, 1997), and academics are supposed to “have high ambitions on behalf of the students” (Isaksen, 2016, p. 3). Furthermore, the ideal student is “integrated in the academic community” (Isaksen, 2016, p. 3), depicted as a junior partaking in the academic guild, contributing to research, knowing her place and respecting her professor.

Implications of the study

The two different ways of talking about the students roles signifies a substantial change in discursive practice between the two reforms that could have profound effects on management, on policy and on the academic labour process, albeit, the word *quality* is used to describe the goal of the reform in both cases. However, the question whether the change in discursive practice leads to real change lingers. Do we still find elements of student-as-customer thinking in the 2016 reform? Does the significant change in the connoted meanings of the word quality between the two reforms have any implications in policymaking? The development of these discussions will in the paper illustrates how a fashionable concept like “quality” lends itself to many ends, and thus becomes empty of meaning as it can convey almost diametrically opposed connotations.

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