

## **Building the Bridges between Theory and Policy: The Quality Assurance Agenda (0221)**

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### **Introduction**

The central purpose of this paper is to construct a reflective approach to the study of higher education policy, which will be illustrated with reference to the unfolding of the quality assurance agenda in the United Kingdom. Although an analysis of that agenda is important in its own right (and our previous research shows how seriously we have taken that concern), it is not the primary focus of this paper. Rather the policy issue serves as a means of illustrating our approach to higher education research, which represents an attempt to link theory and policy analysis through conceptual refinement. It is important to stress that we are outlining an approach to research and *not* presenting our own theoretical position. We will conclude with a short overview of the potential weaknesses of our approach with a brief rebuttal.

### **The model**

#### *The research goal*

The first objective of the research should be to state clearly and concisely the research goal. With reference to our paper the intention is to explore to what extent, and in what ways, the emergence of the quality assurance agenda in the United Kingdom has impacted upon the pedagogy of higher education. We have purposefully not addressed the question of ‘quality’ (have the regulatory procedures enhanced/not enhanced higher education quality?) because this opens up the value-laden Pandora’s box of what constitutes quality.

#### *Theory: Macro, Meso and Micro*

In terms of the quality agenda we suggest the following links between the 3 theoretical levels and the empirical concerns:

*Macro-theory*: the focus will be upon the interaction of the social, economic and political pressures, which are the drivers of change. All the classical sociological theorists could be drawn upon to offer different understandings of how these forces interact to shape the process of change within the policy field under observation.

*Meso-theory*: these are the theoretical positions that plot institutional interaction incorporating: the state, quasi-state, organized interests in the higher education sector and individual higher education institutions (to name some of the key actors). There are interesting meso-theories to be drawn from political science that could be employed at this level of analysis: state theory, pluralism, neo-pluralism and policy network theory.

*Micro-theory*: the key actors in terms of the quality assurance agenda are students and the core academic (teaching) faculty, although the ‘quality inspectors’ as well as ‘institutional managers’ could also be incorporated at this level of the process. What we are exploring is how key actors respond to the process of change. If there is no change in behaviour, inappropriate behavioural changes (in terms of the desired goals) or simply a range of unintended consequences then we may argue that there is policy failure.

### *Conceptual refinement*

An important part of any attempt to theorise the analysis of higher education policy issues is to ground it conceptually. It is the concepts that form the bridge between the theoretical position and the empirical work, and the most significant concepts are those applicable to all three theoretical levels. With respect to the quality assurance agenda, ‘power’ is probably the key concept. Policy decisions, policy implementation and individual responses at ‘the grassroots’ will all be driven by ‘power’ (the perception of your own resources and of the power structure). Thus it is necessary to

define what is meant by power, how its different forms are manifested, and the possibilities for resistance.

Again, at all three levels the question of '*identity*' will intrude, how the individual actors understand the roles they have to play. Are, for example, 'quality inspectors' agents of the state or professional academics? '*Subjectivity*' is the process by which the individual draws upon his/her personal 'definition' (gender, race, class, age student status) to define an '*identity*'. Why is it that the same social variable will be interpreted differently by students/academics/managers to create contrasting personal identities to others who have the same social characteristics?

Perhaps the most interesting concepts are those that try to understand the policy process as a whole, encompassing the three theoretical levels. For example, the process may be perceived as an attempt to establish a legitimate quality assurance model (with the use of appropriate *ideological themes*). Or, alternatively (and more realistically), an imposed model is constructed that gains compliance (if not legitimacy) over time. Or perhaps there are no permanent policy outcomes and one has to think in terms of a continuous process of *negotiation*. Thus, quality assurance functions on the basis of temporary legitimacy and compliance. Of course, should *negotiation* fail then we could move into a phase of resistance, which occurred in the United Kingdom from 1997 to 2004. *Reification* is another multi-layered concept – quality has assumed a meaning of its own that all the key parties are prepared to accept (to live with) but whether it has anything to do with the quality of the teaching and learning process is an entirely different matter.

### **The tyranny of theory?**

The danger of such an approach is that the theoretical perspective is always proven to be correct. However, it is worth making three points:

1. All description and analysis of practice in higher education is theoretically driven. The issue is the visibility of theory. The argument is that description and analysis are more interesting when driven in a theoretically explicit fashion.
2. It is important to relate theoretical construction to rigorous empirical research based on a range of methodologies, for example: discourse analysis, quantitative data, statistical testing, interviews and documentary evidence.
3. If the goal is, as it should be, to engage in theoretical development then research loses its purpose if it fails to enhance this end.

### **Abstract**

With reference to the evolution of the quality assurance agenda in the United Kingdom this paper proposes a strategy for the pursuit of higher education policy research. We argue for a research strategy that aims to link theory to the policy process through conceptual analysis. The paper will present different theoretical themes at the micro, meso and macro levels, and introduce a range of concepts, to suggest a way forward for the analysis of the policy of quality assurance. The issue is whether this is a viable model for the pursuit of higher education research on a broad front.

