

Accountability and Professionalism: A Contradiction in Terms (0247)

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Introduction

Accountability has become a key term in higher education. However, it carries a lot of negative connotations. Its link with an image of “improved performance” (Dubnick, 2005) has produced a fear that academics’ behaviours need to be monitored. The “rituals of verification” (Power, 1997) of accountability are argued to be detrimental to innovative teaching and learning (Findlow, 2008). Accountability is perceived to have encroached on academics’ professional autonomy and reduced their professionalism (Morley, 2003; Shore & Wright, 2000), and reinforced a culture of academics feeling distrusted (Cheng, 2009; Newton, 2000; 2002).

In order to provide an insight into the issue of accountability, this paper explores it in the context of English quality evaluation. This is because the role accountability plays varies by context (Dubnick, 2006), and the evaluation highlighted accountability is argued to have further enhanced government control over higher education (Brown, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Hoecht, 2006). Reflecting on the history and various dimensions of accountability, this paper analyses different types of accountability relationships in higher education, and reveals how to relate accountability to academic professionalism in the culture of quality evaluation.

Historical roots of accountability

The history of accountability can be traced to bookkeeping in the reign of William I in England. He required all the property holders in his realm to render *a count* of what they possessed, in order to establish the foundations of royal governance (Dubnick, 2002; Bovens, 2007). The word ‘accountability’ now has taken on increasing importance in a variety of disciplines, such as political science, accounting, engineering, and education (Dubnick & Justice, 2004).

There are different understandings of accountability. Some highlight its social nature whereby the accountant must feel obliged to inform the accountee of his conduct, by providing data about the performance of tasks, about outcomes, or about procedures (Pollit, 2003). In

this accountability interaction, moral commitment becomes central, because accountability relies on the existence of a ‘moral community’ which shapes the expectations, rules and values of social relationships (Dubnick, 2002). One widely cited definition is: “accountability is a relationship in which an individual or agency is held to answer for performance that involves some delegation of authority to act” (Romzek & Dubnick, 2000, pp.382).

Accountability in English higher education

There is increased demand for accountability in English higher education, which is closely related to a culture of quality evaluation, mainly due to financial reasons. Higher education has been repositioned as a public good, provided by the Government and mainly paid for by taxpayers’ money and students’ fees (Kezar, et al, 2005). Given this arrangement, there is direct accountability between higher education institutions and society (Biesta, 2004). However, the emphasis of accountability to the public has removed students and parents from the ‘accountability loop’, and has formed an indirect accountability relationship between academics and students/parents (Biesta, 2004). Higher education is regulated by the Government and parents/students need to hold the Government accountable for the quality of university teaching and learning, though they could influence what is being delivered by the university. This indirect accountability relationship is complicated by the presence of academic professionalism, which makes academics prioritise the development of their discipline (Becher & Trowler, 2001). The possession of the specialised body of knowledge has further enhanced academics’ authority in deciding what to teach (Freidson, 2001), instead of being dictated by the stakeholders.

The indirect accountability also contradicts a ‘collective responsibility’ (French, 1997) produced by quality evaluation, which requires the institutions to achieve quality teaching and learning, and to be answerable for public funding. This is because the desired quality will be influenced by the individual academics’ work, but it is difficult to define the specific responsibility of individual academics in achieving this responsibility. The difficulty is exacerbated when academics feel that quality evaluation is distant from their individual academic work (Cheng, 2010). This raises a concern of how to achieve accountability for the purpose of quality teaching and learning, instead of producing academics’ defensive attitudes towards accountability.

Developing professional accountability

This paper argues that accountability could become a vehicle of improvement instead of an instrument of control if academics include social and moral responsibility in their notions of professionalism and become willing to be open to the needs of society. According to sociological theories, professions have been depicted as a positive force in social development (Johnson 1972), as well as a source of collective moral force in public life (Brint 1994). The social responsibility of professions requires that an individual professional should support and protect their society's interests and they should be more broadly accountable to their communities for their actions (Kay, 2009).

This social responsibility is closely interrelated to the moral responsibility of a profession, which refers to a knowledge and understanding of 'right' and 'wrong' and the willingness to behave morally (Kay, 2009). As members of an institution and society, academics are morally accountable to their students and the public. If we could refine our notion and understanding of professionalism by emphasising our moral responsibility, which could be something mutual between academics and students, or self-imposed, then we may feel more obliged to commit ourselves to carry out the different tasks that are inherent in our roles. This is because moral responsibility will make accountability not only rely on account giving as a means to elicit purposive behaviour, but also motivate accountors to improve actions or conditions (Page, 2006). Likewise, enhancing the link between moral responsibility and academic professionalism will form a different approach for academics to reach a good balance between responsiveness to the social demands of accountability and private responsibility to their disciplines.

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