



Regulating higher education: Quality assurance and neo-liberal managerialism in higher education—A critical introduction

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Abstract

Quality assurance (QA) regimes have become an increasingly dominant regulatory tool in the management of higher education sectors around the world. By one estimate, nearly half the countries in the world now have quality assurance systems or QA regulatory bodies for higher education. This paper explores the emergence and spread of QA regimes, the coalescence of regulatory logics around qualifications frameworks, and the broad confluence of such approaches in terms of their impact on the historically contested relationship between the state and university. By focusing on the interlocking regulatory logics provided by QA, the article explores how such approaches impose quasi-market, competitive based rationalities premised on neo-liberal managerialism using a policy discourse that is often informed by conviction rather than evidence.

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1. Introduction

As John Stoddart, the former Chairman of the UK Higher Education Quality Council, observed, ‘evaluation, assessment and assurance of academic quality is intrinsic to higher education’ (Brown, 2004, p. x). Indeed it is. Historically it has comprised the *raison d’être* of an academy in search of truth through the application of reason, objective method and the discovery of knowledge – a process built upon peer review, rigorous impartial assessment, critique and a perennial preoccupation with interrogating ideas and epistemologies of knowledge. The embodiment of these traditions and the lofty philosophical pursuit of placing knowledge in the service of humankind lie at the very heart of the idea of the university. Any reading of the history of the modern university, for example, not only celebrates the triumph of reason over theism, creed and dogma but elevates the notion of academic freedom and self-governance as principles central to the operation of university life – ideas that have been enshrined since 1158 when the University of Bologna adopted an academic charter, the *Constitutio Habita*² – centred on the principle of academic freedom – and

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² Malagola, C. (1888), *Statuti delle Università e dei Collegi dello Studio Bolognese*. Bologna: Zanichelli.

which was reaffirmed in 1988 when 430 university rectors from around the world signed the *Magna Charta Universitatum*³ to mark the 900th anniversary of the founding of the University (see also [Ridder-Symoens, 1996](#)).

For much of its long history, the university has thus been a place fortified by its problematic relationship to the state; an institutional space for heterodoxy and exploration reflecting hard fought, fiercely guarded academic freedoms. As the eminent philosopher Michael Oakeshott observed, the university is a conversation where quality is reflected in ‘the voices which speak’ and its value measured in the ‘relics it leaves behind in the minds of those who participate’ ([Oakeshott & Fuller, 1989](#)). The university and the ‘conversation’ over ideas, in other words, produced its own assurance of quality, its own standards, measures and assessments rendered through networks of academic peers.

The last 25 years or so in the history of the university is thus as profound as it is perhaps disturbing. Indeed, it represents as big a puzzle in policy debates of any puzzle there is; how an institution a thousand years in the making and steeped in creeds of self-evaluation can be so effectively usurped in the space of a few short decades? ([Maassen & Stensaker, 2011](#)). As John Stoddart so astutely observed, the question is not ‘whether higher education should be subject to evaluation and assessment,’ it always has been, but rather ‘who should do it’? ([Brown, 2004](#), p. x).

While, historically, universities and academics have exercised this authority and determination, increasingly, of course, this is no longer the case (see [Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014](#)). The rise of the ‘evaluative’ and ‘regulatory’ state and the implementation of what have variously been depicted as new public management (NPM) tools have become an increasingly ubiquitous mode of governance applied equally to the higher education sector ([Christensen & Laegreid, 2010](#); [Dill, 1998](#); [Levi-Faur, 2005](#)). Like numerous other sectors (electricity, water, sanitation, telecommunications, roads, rail, ports and airports, finance and health – among others), higher education too has become progressively subject to regulation by agencies who ‘undertake the classic regulatory functions of setting standards, monitoring activities, and applying enforcement to secure behaviour modification where this is required’ ([King, 2007](#), p. 413; see also [Carroll, 2014](#)) Unlike other sectors, however, the sheer scale of governance by regulation, especially through specific instrumentalities like quality assurance regimes, has been remarkable in its geographic reach ([Christensen & Laegreid, 2010](#); [Dill, 1998](#); [Levi-Faur, 2005](#)). By one count, for example, nearly half the countries in the world now have quality assurance systems or QA regulatory bodies for higher education ([Martin, 2007](#); see also Jarvis, this issue).

The rise of what Roger King terms the ‘higher education regulatory state’ is more than simply a governance innovation, however (2007). Governance through regulation is not a politically benign instrument, nor simply a technicised mode of administrative procedures. *Governmentality*, as Foucault reminds us, is equally a mechanism of political power, a projection of interests and an attempt to control ([Foucault, 2007](#)). In the contemporary university we can observe this in neo-liberal managerial practices situated around ‘performance based evaluation and efforts to frame, regulate and optimise academic life’ ([Morrissey, 2013](#), p. 799). Research assessment exercises, assessments of academic output quality (esteem, grant revenues generated, consultancies awarded and research ‘impact’), the intensity of research productivity, teaching quality and other performance metrics increasingly define tenure, promotion and career trajectories. Regulation of the higher education sector is thus equally a politics of surveillance where quality assurance serves as an instrument of accreditation and a mechanism to prise compliance (see also [Engebretsen, Heggen, & Eilertsen, 2012](#); [Lucas, 2014](#)). While we need not invoke the images of Bentham’s and Foucault’s panopticon or suggest that governmentality represents singular power structures with grand designs, the emergence of normative and now dominant regulatory instruments situated around reporting, transparency, accountability, performance and audit cultures, and the increasing subjugation of the academy to regimes of assessment based on metrics that are driven by quasi-market like competition, act increasingly as a means for regimenting academic and institutional compliance ([Deem & Brehony, 2005](#), pp. 219–220; see also [Worthington & Hodgson, 2005](#)).

In the contemporary era, the university thus sits oddly amid two narratives; one that prizes academic freedom, independence of thought and expression, heterodoxy and exploration to create new knowledge frontiers, on the other hand, an increasingly intrusive series of regulatory regimes that seek to manage, steer and control the sector in ways that serve the interests of the state and the economy by applying specific ideational motifs about efficiency, value, performance, and thus the economic worth of the university to the economy ([Rosa, Stensaker, & Westerheijden, 2007](#), p. 1).

³ <http://www2.unibo.it/avl/charta/charta.htm>

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