



The Dutch way of New Public Management A critical perspective on quality assurance in higher education

Jürgen Enders^{a,*}, Don F. Westerheijden^b

^a School of Education, University of Southampton, Highfield Campus, Building 32, Southampton SO17 1BJ, United Kingdom

^b Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, University of Twente, P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands

Abstract

Our paper investigates the emergence and development of quality assurance (QA) for teaching in the Netherlands since the mid-1980s. We conceptualise our paper on the background of the multi-level study of New Public Management (NPM) as a narrative of political change, as a choice of certain policy instruments and distinct organisational forms, and as a set of practical control technologies. We show how the specific policy regime of corporatist negotiations and *Rechtsstaat* instruments deflected QA as a 'hard' NPM-policy. QA has nevertheless been instrumental within a wider NPM-inspired policy mix for achieving new ways of governmental control of universities and managerialist control within universities. We conclude by arguing that an important function of QA has been to provide 'legitimacy through procedures'.

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1. Introduction

Quality assurance (QA) was introduced in Dutch higher education in the middle of the 1980s. In Europe, the Netherlands were thus among the early adopters of QA, closely following initiatives in Great Britain and France – quite different countries in terms of policy regimes and of public policy making. The Thatcher government's introduction of New Public Management (NPM) into the public sector of the UK and the higher education sector was one source of inspiration for the Dutch 1982 neo-liberal/neo-conservative government, yet there are different forms of NPM. The Dutch case is interesting because it has been influenced by the ideas and practices in QA from the UK and the US but also by corporatist traditions of network governance and egalitarian *Rechtsstaat* traditions, in a particular mix of consultative democracy. The questions for this article are: How has QA in teaching been introduced in higher education in the Netherlands and how has it developed? What were the consequences of the 'Dutch way' in higher education reform for QA and the related management of academic work? And what are the consequences of QA reforms for authority relations in the field of higher education, and for the quality of higher education?

We conceptualise our paper on the background of three distinct though related elements for the multi-level study of NPM (Reed, 2002) as an alternative model for the political and institutional order of higher education: NPM as a narrative of political change, as a choice of certain policy instruments and a distinct organisational form of universities,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: J.Enders@soton.ac.uk (J. Enders), d.f.westerheijden@utwente.nl (D.F. Westerheijden).

and as a set of practical control technologies. We further study the emergence and development of QA and its co-evolution with other NPM-inspired policies within a policy context conceptualised as being influenced by NPM, corporatist negotiations and *Rechtsstaat* policies (Ferlie, Musselin, & Andresani, 2008; Paradeise, Reale, Bleiklie, & Ferlie, 2009, Westerheijden, de Boer, & Enders, 2009). We investigate their interplay, sometimes conflicting influence, and the relative impact of NPM for public policies, organisational responses, and emerging new control technologies of academic work in universities as ‘soft bureaucracies’ (Courpasson, 2000).

Our paper shows how the international diffusion of QA as part of a hard NPM-approach has been deflected by corporatist negotiations and has been implemented as a process of self-evaluation organised by the higher education sector itself. This approach has been supplemented by accreditation policies in the wake of the Bologna process that brought QA into the realm of the *Rechtsstaat*. To a large extent, QA remained a de-coupled administrative exercise focusing on accountability, uniformity and paperwork. The co-evolution of QA with other NPM-inspired policies (competition in quasi-markets, corporate model of the university, contractualisation of government–university relationships) strengthened, however, governmental control of higher education ‘at arm’s length’. QA also forms one of the instrumental tools of managerial control using an impersonal system of governance within universities, the normalisation of professional success and the objectivisation of personal responsibility for the control of academic work. In the absence of political will to establish robust evidence for the effect of QA on quality in teaching and learning, we conclude by arguing that an important function of QA has been to provide ‘legitimacy through procedures’.

2. Conceptual background

For most authors, the numerous higher education reforms that have been implemented in the last decades in the Netherlands have their roots in the rise and dissemination of NPM narratives that inspired public sector reform in general as well as higher education reform in particular. In higher education, these reform processes were further accelerated by the central role knowledge and innovation were expected to play for economic development in society. As a result, higher education found and still finds attention on governmental agendas unknown in the previous decades. In times of budgetary restrictions, policies aiming at increasing the productivity, efficiency and relevance of academic activities have been launched, and ‘quality’ and ‘quality assurance’ have become one of the guiding themes in Dutch public policies for higher education.

In the theory of political change in the Netherlands, NPM constituted an alternative model for the political and institutional order of higher education and can be defined in relation to three distinct though conceptually related elements that are instructive for the multi-level study of NPM: Reed (2002) conceptualises NPM, first, as a narrative of political change which is constructed to critique the established political order in the regulation, funding and management of universities as public service organisation and to construct the need for a new regime of regulation, funding and management. Second, NPM calls for the choice of certain policy instruments being embedded into the narrative of change and a distinct organisational form of universities as public service providers that provides the administrative and managerial practices through which political change will be implemented. Third, NPM provides a set of practical control technologies through which policies and their instrumentation can be translated into practices that change structures, processes and behaviours ‘on the ground’.

NPM is one of the internationally most influential public sector reform movements emerging in the UK under the Thatcher governments of the 1980s. NPM is, however, not a uniform concept but rather an umbrella term interpreted differently in different countries and by different authors (see Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; Boston, 2010). In the Netherlands, the renewal of the public sector that went by the name of NPM had specific, usually ‘softer’ forms than e.g. in the UK. In Dutch higher education policy NPM maintained the central tenets as identified in the international study of higher education policy (Ferlie et al., 2008; Paradeise et al., 2009): First, a re-ordering of state-university relationships towards output control; second, the introduction and strengthening of markets or of competition in quasi markets for institutional funding; third, the empowerment of the university as an organisation and of leadership and management over-ruling collegial self-governance; and last but not least, a focus on output, performance, value for money, and quality with a growth of related audit and quality management systems (Enders, 2013). NPM, also in its softer Dutch form, seeks a more efficient and more results-oriented higher education system. NPM policies thus entail changes in rules and social norms as well as in organisational resource dependencies, i.e. institutional pressures towards the corporate organisation model of universities as part of broader rationalisation process, and novel forms of

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