



Academic resistance to quality assurance processes in higher education in the UK

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Abstract

The focus of this article is on academic resistance to quality assurance processes that have developed within UK higher education in relation to both research and teaching. These quality processes are often seen as forms of disciplining technologies (Blackmore, 2009) and are arguably an important part of the means by which new public management has been introduced to the sector. They have been perceived to monitor and control academic work in relation to teaching and research within UK universities over the last 20 years or so. However, this article attempts to look at the complexity of academic reactions to these processes and the ways in which academics situated within particular contexts might challenge and resist the discourses and subject positions that are being offered to them Thomas and Davies (2005). Following the work of Graham (2011) and Hyatt (2013) a Foucauldian informed critical discourse analysis is used to examine two critical case studies of resistance to both the quality assurance processes for teaching and the assessment and evaluation of university research work.

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1. Introduction

There has been much written on the neo-liberalisation of higher education and the pernicious role of new public management processes in disciplining and subjugating the academic workforce. The austerity cutbacks to higher education and the shift towards increased privatisation of the sector, more acutely in England than elsewhere in the UK, has arguably intensified these processes. As Shahjahan (2014) argues, the reforms have been widespread:

More specifically, neoliberal reforms included drastic funding cutbacks to public HE which led to increases in private revenue generation (e.g., increases in Business HE partnerships and rising tuition fees), proliferating accountability measures of HE outcomes, the restructuring of shared governance towards corporate models, and the resurgence of part-time academic labour (p. 221).

There is no denying the veracity of the pace and scale of change and the significant influence of ‘neo-liberal logics’ (Shahjahan, 2014) that permeate UK higher education such that the overriding economic imperative and logic of self-enterprising individuals and economic rationality becomes the means by which the existence of higher education is routinely justified. This is merged with processes of new public management as part of the modes of “technology of governance that makes certain material practices and policies intelligible, practicable and

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governable” (Shahjahan, 2014: p. 221). The effects of these technologies as has been perceived by many to have played a destructive force in the lifeworld of academics and indeed those working across all sectors of public education, is captured well by Ball (2003) in his evocation of the ‘terrors of performativity’ heaped on educationalists through the impetus of these technologies of control. This impetus to performativity “requires individual practitioners to organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations” and “live an existence of calculation” (p. 215).

This sense of the all-encompassing power of neo-liberal logics and new public management processes extends throughout much of the literature on higher education and is seen to be detrimental to academic autonomy, creativity and authenticity. However, the potential of academic resistance to such demands for performativity is something that is interesting to contemplate and is what has motivated the writing of this article. In terms of theorising processes of new public management, there has been a tendency according to Thomas and Davies (2005) “to portray NPM as a ‘blanket discourse’, colonising the public services” (p. 689). It should be understood that “the strength, cohesion and normalising effects of NPM are highly context dependent” making it necessary to move away from images of NPM as a ‘given’, stamping its authority on the hapless professional in a highly deterministic and unidirectional way (p. 689). There is a call to theorise these processes in a more nuanced way and to understand the myriad of ways in which individuals respond to, incorporate and resist these processes and the meanings and modes of being that are being promoted.

While acknowledging the strength of new disciplinary technologies . . . and the crusade throughout the 1990s to inculcate in public sector professionals new attitudes, values and identities, the paper illustrates how individuals are not passive recipients of discourses. Rather, NPM is highly dynamic, with individuals appropriating different meanings in reflections on self in conjunction with NPM. This throws into question the portrayal of NPM as a hegemonic discourse, sweeping across the public services, deprofessionalizing all in its wake (Thomas & Davies, 2005: 700)

The focus of this article, therefore is on the quality assurance processes that have developed within UK higher education and raise the question of academic resistance to these processes. Given that these quality processes are often seen as forms of disciplining technologies (Blackmore, 2009), I want to look also at the complexity of these processes and the ways in which individuals situated within particular contexts might challenge and resist the discourses and subject positions that are being offered to them as well as the different meanings that may be given to particular situations.

I will begin by giving an outline of the development of quality assurance processes in the UK in relation to both research and teaching, including a discussion of the research literature that has investigated academic responses to these processes. I will then consider the challenges of theorising ideas of resistance that allows for a more nuanced stance on organisational process and individual subject positionings. I will then go on to discuss the work of Graham (2011) and Hyatt (2013) in order to set out the critical discourse analysis framework that will be utilised to explore the two “critical case” examples of academics resistance to these quality assurance processes of teaching and research. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn on the implications of this for challenging these quality assurance processes and the neo-liberal and new public management agendas that are perceived by many to have engulfed higher education.

2. From where to here? – the evolution of quality assurance of research and teaching in UK universities

The extent of the quality assurance and/or monitoring procedures in the UK has gained worldwide renown. It has been praised but also much maligned as academics in other countries fear the extent of quality audit processes utilised in the UK context. However, although the UK was certainly an early adopter of such national audit systems, many other countries across Europe and Australasia in particular increasingly utilised such monitoring tools, albeit perhaps in different forms and in different ways as demonstrated in this special issue (Jarvis, 2014). I am focusing here though on the UK context and the development of quality assurance processes and so will provide some very brief historical context to this as well as a discussion of the research literature and commentary, which looks at perceptions of the impacts on institutions and academic work. I will address teaching and research processes in turn.

2.1. Quality assurance of learning and teaching in higher education in the UK: the HEQC/QAA

In the early 1990s the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) was established to extend the processes of quality audit in UK universities. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was established in 1997 and it was jointly funded by

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