

# Sussex Research

## The micropolitics of quality

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## The micropolitics of quality

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## **The Micropolitics of Quality**

**Professor Louise Morley**

### **Scherazade Lives!**

I was invited to speak at a friend's booklaunch in Australia last year. It was a most impressive event. There were t-shirts emblazoned with the book title, gourmet food and speeches worthy of an Oscar ceremony. Tears and sparkling wine flowed as people- especially partners and close colleagues- were hugged and thanked for their support and love. The authors took us through each stage of the book's life- from initial conception of ideas, through the struggles and challenges and eventually to publication. I found myself wondering why we do not tend to give this considered attention to the multi-facetted aspects of the creative process in Britain. Booklaunches where I work are usually very elegant and celebratory affairs - heavily supported by the organisation. However, they tend to be fairly brief. It is not usual to focus on the process of creative and practical production in such detail. I wondered if, in the audit culture, we do not have the time to stop and reflect on the product because by the time that it is published we are on to

the next production. Like Scherazade, we are delighted that our academic lives have been preserved by the production of words. In the current moral economy of higher education, publication is a necessity rather than an achievement. Academics in the UK have become like battery hens! Audit is based on a negative logic: the discourse of continuous improvement creates an open-endedness that means that celebration and closure are inappropriate.

In the economy of quality assurance, learning and (audited) organisations require a lifelong process of up-skilling or re-skilling<sup>1</sup>. It is questionable what subject positions are available for academics when identity is constantly in flux and creativity is being replaced by productivity. This is part of what I mean by the psychic economy of quality assurance<sup>2</sup>.

Academia has deeply internalised the performance culture to such an extent that we now regulate and define ourselves in relation to dominant performance indicators. The pressure appears to be working! Crewe highlighted Britain's (underfunded) productivity:

The UK remains the second most important  
producer of scientific and scholarly research in the  
world in almost all disciplines and punches well

above its weight. With 1% of the world population, it accounts for 4.5% of the world's spend on science, but produces 8% of the world's scientific papers, and 13% of the most highly cited. It wins 10% of internationally recognised science prizes and has produced 44 Nobel prize winners in the last 50 years. In fact UK research productivity is far superior to that of the US: our hard working academics produce 16 research papers for every \$1m invested compared with the 10 produced in the US and the 4 in Japan <sup>3</sup>.

The danger is that performance and productivity rather than intellectualism are valued. Intellectual responsibility has been undermined and replaced by accountability - not to one's discipline, profession or sense of self-efficacy, but to external auditors. It appears that academics are now valued for the contribution that they make to their organisation's performance, rather than to their professional or intellectual communities. McWilliam noted:

One of the most difficult issues for academics to address is that it is not possible for anyone to sit outside the performance culture and still be a valued player in a particular area of university activity<sup>4</sup>.

The 'good researcher' is discursively produced via performance indicators linked to audit. Regular academic publications are key indicators of activity. By today's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) criteria, the scientists who discovered DNA i.e. Franklin, Crick and Watson- would have been classified as failing academics as their work took too long to be returned in the RAE period of assessment. Receiving research funding is another indicator of worth. Yet, in 1996 Sir Harry Kroto won a Nobel prize for exactly the same research in Chemistry that was refused funding by the engineering and physical science research council<sup>5</sup>. The indicators of audit are unreliable and unstable and yet are invested with considerable symbolic and material power.

Studies on the changing political economy of higher education tend to emphasise the globalisation of neo-liberalism<sup>6 7 8 9</sup>. Peters believes that in the age of global capitalism universities have been reduced to a technical

ideal of performance within a contemporary discourse of 'excellence'<sup>10</sup>. Yet when I have disseminated my research on UK quality assurance to international audiences, colleagues in other employment regimes have greeted normalised everyday practices in the UK with utter disbelief. While I accept that the basic principles of quality assurance are extending their global reach, I am aware of Cowen's reminder back in 1996 that Britain has the most audited higher education system in the world<sup>11</sup>. And that was before the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency!

A common response from international colleagues is to listen with interest to the ideas and critique contained in my work, but there is usually confusion about procedures and structures for quality assurance. The labour intensity and costs are hard for other countries, particularly low-income countries, to accept. Quality assurance is also perceived by many societies in transition as being in opposition to democratisation processes and the liberalisation of the curriculum. It is seen as over-regulation by the state. Conversely, in countries with a more liberal tradition and radical social policies, including the Nordic countries, the UK system is seen as rather heavy-handed and archaic. In Brazil, a member of the audience told me that they no longer had a military regime and that they don't want people sitting at the back of

classrooms class spying on them again. A Dutch colleague was intrigued by the emotional responses to audit in Britain, particularly when the national stereotype here is that of phlegmaticism. He remarked the audits in the Netherlands happen regularly but nobody even really notices them. In Moldova, colleagues articulated the concerns of a small country- also in transition- and asked how the UK manages to find so many people to be assessors. A French professor laughed out loud when she heard that student completion rates were performance indicators in Britain. She reminded me that the opposite is the case in France- the fewer students left on the course, the higher its status. One of the most portentous comments came from a colleague in the Czech Republic who stated very simply that 'our past is your future'. Just as emerging democracies are sloughing off major state regulation of higher education, Britain appears to be embracing it in a complex autonomy/accountability two-step. There are dangers that universities will become mere delivery agencies for government policies <sup>12</sup>. So what is it that I have been saying to colleagues across the globe that has caused such incredulity?

### **Transformative Potential or Symbolic Violence?**



In the interests of academic balance and fairness, I have tried to suggest that like any regime of power, quality assurance has both creative and oppressive potential. I have interviewed over 100 academics and managers in the last five years for various research projects on the audit culture<sup>13 14</sup>. There are many qualitymongers out there who genuinely believe in the transformative potential of audit<sup>15</sup>. For them, the auditing of teaching and learning has produced new entitlements and empowerment for students<sup>16</sup>. In terms of staff, it has provided new forms of visibility for areas of work that were traditionally undervalued in the academy. Hence, it has provided some new job opportunities for women, as they work their way into positions including quality managers and teaching and learning co-ordinators<sup>17</sup>. Even the RAE has some product champions from counter-hegemonic communities. Some of the feminists who I have interviewed have told me that they were blocked, on ideological or exclusionary grounds, for promotion for years before the advent of the RAE. Whereas now they believe that all that counts is the number of publications in international journals. Never mind what you are writing about and how subversive or radical it might be<sup>18</sup>. However, for every one informant who celebrates audit, there are at least ten who decry it. Throughout my research, I have heard numerous stories of occupational stress, illness, alienation, fear and resentment. Social relations have been

contaminated by the competition and beratement culture of the audited university and individual identities are damaged by failure to shape up to this month's indicator of value.

The RAE has elicited strong responses in a range of other research studies. Warde's study on the impact of the 1992 Research Assessment Exercise reported a sense of declining morale, loss of job satisfaction and a decline of collegiality<sup>19</sup>. No one in her study reported any positive effects of the RAE. Most thought it detrimental to quality, of both teaching and research. Other researchers have also commented on the distorting intellectual effects of writing for audit. In his work on the behaviour modification of academics, Talib found that academics reported that they tried to tailor their submissions for the 1996 RAE to the perceived preferences of the panel, which would be judging their work<sup>20</sup>. Mace also found that staff were concentrating their research attention in areas likely to carry weight in the RAE<sup>21</sup>. The disciplinary aspects of the RAE have also been highlighted by Elton who accuses it of having a competitive, adversarial and punitive ethos<sup>22</sup>. Broadhead and Howard also locate the RAE as a form of punishment in higher education management<sup>23</sup>.

The audit of teaching and learning was also constructed by many of my informants as wasteful, stressful, over-bureaucratic, expensive and paradoxically guilty of diminishing teaching quality <sup>24</sup>. Other impact studies have also found it hard to relate the auditing of teaching and learning to its actual improvement. Harvey et al, discovered that although some processes, notably external examination, were perceived as providing a check on standards, there was little support for the view that external quality evaluation improved the student learning experience <sup>25</sup>. Horsburgh's study of the role and importance of external processes on the development of transformative learning in the classroom concluded that there are far more important factors impacting on innovation in learning than external quality monitoring e.g. the curriculum<sup>26</sup>.

Although it is difficult to map a directly causal relationship between research and the audit culture, for many QA was perceived as a form of symbolic violence and, indeed, institutional bullying <sup>27</sup>. The low morale, anxiety and exhaustion that I detected in my research could be attributed to a range of macro, meso and micro factors. Work intensification in the public services has been set against a backdrop of fears of global terrorism, violence and the precariousness of the risk society.

Symbolic violence can sometimes be relayed micropolitically via distorted interpersonal power relations. Bullying has attracted considerable attention in recent literature in organisation studies<sup>28</sup>. It has been gendered and racialised and slowly it has been linked to sexualities and a whole range of other structures of inequality that Judith Butler would encode as embarrassed etc.<sup>29</sup>. However, it is usually associated with dysfunctional individuals. It is rarely constructed as institutionalised via state policies. It is important to remember that quality audits are essentially relationships of power between observers and observed and as such, the potential for abuse multiplies. There are many explanations as to how this has occurred.

McWilliam focused on how the structures have the potential to create tension because they are in opposition to a perceived chaos<sup>30</sup>. She reminds us that audit mechanisms are designed to ensure organisational precision for coping with (appropriate) social imprecision. This tidying up and standardisation can result in the production and reproduction of norms and a strong moral imperative. An important part of the power relations is the way in which norms are created and maintained. Norms can constitute an invisible web of power and domination because the norms become internalised and more difficult to recognise and contest<sup>31</sup>. The psychic

operation of the norm can offer a more insidious route for regulatory power than explicit coercion <sup>32</sup>. We learn to regulate or berate ourselves in line with cultural expectations. For many academics, the bullying or domination of audit is perceived as a type of purification rite, or decluttering like Feng Shui. It feels uncomfortable, but it is making them better professionals.

### **Peering In**

One of the ways in which academics become better professionals is via reflexivity, but also by constantly receiving critical feedback. Academic life is based to a large extent on a high degree of peer review <sup>33</sup>. Quality assurance is not new. It was originally an integral part of craftpersonship and professionalism. More recently, it has been disaggregated from the professions, formalised and transformed into an object of inquiry <sup>34</sup>. Universities have possessed various forms of internal and external mechanisms for assuring the quality of their work. The external examiners' system has traditionally been a form of quality assurance. Peer review is also involved in the award of research grants, RAE scores, publication and promotion. Yet, the peer review involved in audit also seems to elicit strong reactions. Peer review is a political act as it involves making judgements of worth in line with state priorities. Academics have been

co-opted into the policy process. A question is whether this has helped to steer policy or to implement unacceptable policies. The involvement of academics in quality audits can be seen as a strategy to ensure that external stakeholders do not monopolise the structures and processes. It can also be seen as a form of capillary power in which professions are seduced into policing themselves. Peer review and external examining are based largely on social capital i.e. social networks and horizontal communications. Hence it is open to inclusions and exclusions that can reinforce or challenge academic power relations. It is not just people who are included or excluded but also ideas, practices, and methods. An argument in favour of peer review is that it keeps quality matters firmly in the grasp of the academic community itself. However, the term 'community' can often be used to disguise the boundaries and barriers that operate within a professional group. Iris Marion Young noted that 'the ideal of community... expresses a desire for the fusion of subjects with one another which in practice operates to exclude those with whom the group chooses not to identify'<sup>35</sup>. An army of peers has been created to enforce professional identification with predetermined norms.

The assessment of quality in teaching and learning and in research in Britain has purported to be collegial, as peers are responsible for undertaking the audits. Brennan et al. believe that there is a difference, however, between the

‘moral’ authority of peers in contrast to the ‘bureaucratic’ authority of quality bodies <sup>36</sup>. Peer review involves a complex combination of insider and outsider status. In the tradition of academic endeavour, externality is seen to represent objectivity <sup>37</sup>. With peer review there is both a blurring and marking out of boundaries. Strathern notes that there is an interdependence between the performer and the spectator and that this relationship relies on each consenting to review or be reviewed <sup>38</sup>. It is a comedy of manners <sup>39</sup>. However, the power relations involved in peer observation remain largely untheorised. Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond suggest that the majority of the literature published on peer observation concentrates on the mechanisms for its implementation <sup>40</sup>. Yet peers can also represent a form of threat and danger as their externality makes them ‘other’. They contribute to, rather than reduce, risk. Douglas discusses how risk and danger are increasingly linked to invasion <sup>41</sup>:

The modern risk concept, parsed now as danger, is invoked to protect individuals against encroachments of others (p. 7)

So, we could say that peers occupy a curiously hybrid position. They are both insiders and outsiders. The proximity of the ‘similar but dissimilar

other' provokes a type of discomfort not unlike the current hysteria over asylum seekers. Macro issues of status and power are enacted via micropolitical practices of inspection.

Quality assurance, as a political technology, also produces new categories of experts. Shore and Wright maintain that these specialists fulfil four main roles <sup>42</sup>:

First, they developed the new expert knowledge that provided the classifications for the new normative grid. Second, they advised on the design of institutional procedures. Third, they staffed and presided over the new regulatory mechanisms and systems, and judged adherence to or deviance from them.

Fourth, they had a redemptive role in so far as they made their expert knowledge available to individuals who wished to engage in the process of self-improvement in order to modify their conduct according to the desired norms.

Hence peer review appears benign and collegial, but is underpinned with a set of values and hegemonies that are highly problematic. Peer review mediates government policy. While the situation described by Shore and Wright appears



clinically efficient, my research suggests that the process is chaotic and amateurish<sup>43</sup>. There is little evidence to suggest that quality assessment is a stable, coherent and unified project. A recurring issue was that assessors frequently came with their own prejudices and agendas, which they sought to impose or substantiate in the organisations and programmes that they were reviewing. These represent a major form of micropolitical interference<sup>44</sup>. This micropolitical interference actually deprofessionalises academics: reviewed and reviewer alike. Paradoxically, the grading system degrades.

Quality audit carries the potential for misrecognition and status injury<sup>45</sup>.

One of the reasons why I think that UK academics find the process so stressful is that the profession is already subjected to status injury via low pay and deteriorating employment conditions<sup>46</sup>. Salaries are higher in many competitor countries: the average salary for a lecturer is 8.5% higher in France, 13% higher in Australia and 28% higher in the United States<sup>47</sup>.

Studies on the deprofessionalisation of educationalists tend to cite two salient features. The first characteristic of deprofessionalisation is the removal of discretionary power in the area of pedagogy and, the second, is the imposition of constraints on teaching practice through the bureaucratic criteria imported from quality assurance agencies such as the QAA in

Britain<sup>48</sup>. There are those who believe that externality enhances quality and professionalism. Hart suggests that ‘everyone needs a voice of contradiction somewhere, which may also be a voice of conscience, to keep them up to the mark’<sup>49</sup>. The hegemonic implications of knowing the precise configuration of ‘the mark’ are frequently left untheorised. It is never clear how we might come to know where the mark is nor why it is set where it is. A question is whether the external voices displace professional judgement, with quality assurance perceived as the authoritative construction of norms. A further key question is who decides what signs of quality are valued and audited?

### **Quality not Equality**

One justification for the widespread use of quality assurance is that it promotes a more equitable and knowable education sector. There are at least two questions we need to pursue when considering the relationship between quality and equality. The first is whether there is an overlap or transfer between the two forms of policy activity. Although transparency in the audit culture is frequently positioned as a challenge to the hidden curriculum it does not appear to transfer readily onto equality policies in the academy. Indeed it is perceived by many to focus on services and learning

environments for students and avoids dealing with the same issues for staff<sup>50</sup>. This seems to compliment the general picture of academic work transformed into the provision of service and customer care. Academic work is becoming more aligned with the service industries, with a remarkable lack of resistance from members of the profession. There is an assumption that quality is a common professional ethic and is therefore indisputable. Organisational members simply work longer hours to accommodate the increasing demands. Sennett observes that the imperative to demonstrate capacious, flexible responses is a characteristic of work in late modernity<sup>51</sup>.

Additionally, performance indicators in quality audits can over-ride equality concerns. For example, the RAE, rather than principles of social justice and inclusion, can be a central driver in decision-making about appointments and promotions. On the other hand, one way in which quality and equality do sometimes overlap is that they are both perceived as forms of regulation and surveillance in the managed university. Equality initiatives are sometimes perceived as 'more managerialist noise', and becoming neutralised or associated, not with radical social movements, but with neo-liberal modes of control and governance<sup>52</sup>.

A second consideration is whether the practices of audit are reproducing or challenging organisational and social inequalities. Dominant discourses are related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structures in society and in organisations. Some aspects of quality assessment procedures are reinforcing gendered divisions of labour in the academy, as more women are entering middle management positions as quality managers or co-ordinators of teaching and learning. The entry of women into quality management is open to multiple interpretations. One view is that new managerialism in general is perceived as reinforcing ‘macho’ styles of leadership, as it is very outcome-oriented, with emphasis on targets, performance, and measurement<sup>53 54 55</sup>. A contradictory view also exists. Quality audits, particularly those focussing on teaching and learning, are seen as enabling women to enter the managerial elite in organisations, and sometimes help fulfil ideological and career aspirations concerned with influence and change agency. Luke argues that ‘working creatively and politically within dynamic contradictions can mean rearticulating and using a managerialist discourse such as QA for social justice means and ends in the interests of women’<sup>56</sup>. However, for many feminists, the move into quality management can often be accompanied by the imperative to moderate radical ideals and compromise values<sup>57</sup>. A key question to pose is

whether women's entry into quality management can be of benefit to all women in the organisation.

### **Can One Conclude?**

For many members of the academy the coercive nature of quality assurance practices and procedures interrupts the democratic conversation. Quality assurance has overlooked the politics of knowledge and reduces major inequalities among staff, students and organisations to taxonomies of effectiveness and quantitative scores. For others, the challenges to the positional power of academics and encoding of student entitlements is a form of empowerment, reprofessionalisation and modernisation. Concerns with the accountability of an elite professional group, transparency and consumer rights are perceived as major challenges to traditional power relations in the academy<sup>58</sup>. However, it is questionable whether quality assurance practices and procedures incorporate an understanding of equality and diversity.

It is hard to disaggregate quality from other aspects of the changing political economy of higher education, and indeed from wider macro concerns

associated with risk, best value and knowledge transfer. Yet, the audit culture has had a profound effect on the UK academy. There is a tension and fear in the performative audit culture that is often hard to locate. The locus of responsibility for policy activity and implementation shifts from the globalised market economy to the state, to peer assessors, to managers and sometimes even to the consumers themselves. Audit has invaded the professional ambience and identities and like Foucault's notion of capillary power, it is everywhere and nowhere <sup>59</sup>.

Looking ahead, I wish to recommend that if the quantitative evaluation of education is set to continue, then there should be some integrated measures which combine quality and equality. These will need to consider the gestalt as well as the fracturing or Taylorisation of higher education functions. It is predicted that the state-funded university will become one among many providers of higher education <sup>60</sup>. Private higher education is expanding in many national locations and 'diploma mills' are mushrooming. Equally, research can be undertaken by a range of competitors in the commercial sector. However, universities need to provide some value-added (or maybe I should say values-added) in terms of citizenship education and social responsibility. This needs to be extended to both students and staff, with

attention paid to inputs, that is the quality of employment conditions as well as outputs and outcomes. Most important of all, quality assurance needs to incorporate an understanding of the processes that promote and impede the democratic possibilities of higher education.

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