

1. INTRODUCTION ABOUT QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EDUCATION

An Piessens

Coordinator LINQED educational network – ITM Antwerp

Quality in education is considered as a theme that affects everyone involved in education. It is the undercurrent that runs through educational activities, be it the design of a (new) curriculum, the assessment of students, the innovation of teaching methodologies, and many more activities. The theme does not only affect education from the inside, but also from the outside: the call for quality and quality assurance is influenced by policy developments, that grant educational institutions on one hand more autonomy, but ask for more accountability in return.

Even though it is a theme that affects us all, the scope of quality in education is vast and the theme is prone to profound professional, scholarly and societal debate and discussion. If we want to make it our central theme for work in the 2nd LINQED – workshop, it is helpful and necessary to list some of the discussions and difficulties related to Quality in Education, as a basis to develop our approach to the coming workshop. Because, even if it needs no convincing that the LINQED–members consider Quality in Education as an important theme, it is not at all clear whether everyone wants the same. Moreover, our national contexts differ, and these contexts play an important role in how quality works (van Damme, 2000).

1.1. The rise of Quality and Quality Assurance in education

Let's start with a more general look at the rise of the importance of quality in education. For starters I'll make an abstraction of the possible difference between Quality in Education and Quality Assurance in education.

Even though we can well assume that higher education institutions have always been concerned about the quality of the education they provided, the rise of 'quality' and 'quality assurance processes' signals a fundamental change in the relation between higher education institutions and their stakeholders (such as professional associations, students, government). Van Damme (2000) lists different factors that – in the European context – have led to this new 'regime of quality'. He sketches how the massification of higher education, a diminished confidence by external stakeholders in the more traditional academic quality assurance mechanisms and budget restrictions and fiscal crises have led to a decrease in funding per student and have urged for more efficiency in public expenditure. Higher education institutions were expected to be more accountable and the higher education environment itself has become more competitive.

Quality is not a neutral concept in this context, but: "the notion of quality becomes a distinguishing labelling tool with potentially powerful effects. One can expect that the international higher education market will become more competitive and more diversified in the future, and that (perceived) quality will become the decisive criterion for students, employers, etc... in taking decisions in an increasingly complex market " (van Damme 2000: 10).

However, the growing importance of quality and quality assurance is not only due to an increasing call for accountability and an enhanced competitiveness in higher education. Policies in education and 'quality-talk' seem to be 'dominated' (Sutherland, 2007) by three discourses:

- 1) An *economic* discourse focusing on efficiency and effectiveness;
- 2) A *social* discourse focusing on redress, equity, equality and democratization;
- 3) An *academic* discourse focusing on 'excellence'.

Is this context description recognisable for network members? If not, how should the description be complemented?

What is specific for the rise of quality and quality assurance in your context?

Are the discourses recognisable?

1.2. Conflation of discourses and imperatives?

The rise of quality and quality assurance in education is often criticized, but it is actually mainly the predominance of the economic discourse that is under scrutiny. An important argument in these criticisms is for instance that it is not possible to reduce education to just a blueprint-able and malleable service. (e.g. Gillies 2008; Morley 2001, 2005; Simons & Masschelein 2006; Smith 2008) "Quality within the public sector has had a varied career", argues Gillies, "primarily because of the fundamental problem of transforming what happens within public sector discourse – actions, practices and words – into the simple model which only sees the public as 'clients' or 'customers'. (Temple 2005 in Gillies 2009: 689). Another reason for the scepticism about this shift towards quality (assurance procedures) in education is that it is associated with neoliberal politics, including quite a narrow focus on budget cuts. (e.g. Gillies 2009; Morley 2001 & 2005; Smith 2008)

Other authors, while acknowledging these criticisms, plead for a more nuanced approach, assuming that quality policies can work for different imperatives or within different perspectives (Newton 2000; Soudien 2007; Sutherland 2007; van Damme 2000). Often a quality policy refers to goals of excellence (academic), as well as efficiency (economic) and equality (social). For instance, for South Africa, Sutherland (2007) argues strongly that the implementation of quality was not just a way of 'managerialising' higher education, but particularly a means to address inequities among higher institutions due to the past.

However, even these authors warn for too big a belief in rhetoric. Therefore, they research 'how quality and quality assurance works' in educational practices. This results in research with some of the following research questions:

- What kind of 'equality' is actually produced through some quality regimes?
- What are the effects of the focus on excellence on gender relations in the university
- Which discretionary space do teachers still have in a university environment dominated by quality?

As is most often the case with social effects of policies, these effects are ambivalent, some work for the benefit, but others work also to the disadvantage of educational institutions, their 'constituency' and their staff. And, we should not neglect that, even if quality is 'enacted' within a mixture of discourses, often the discourse of efficiency and excellence mould the discourse of equality (Gillies 2009; Morley 2005; Simons & Masschelein 2006).

Before moving onto the question how quality functions in educational institutions, we first give a sketch of the policy environment for the rise of quality in education.

What are the criticisms and praise towards quality/assurance in education in your context?

Do you know of any solutions to the criticisms that have not been mentioned?

Do you know of practices dealing in a successful way with quality/assurance in education in your context?

1.3. Quality functions in a constellation of quality – quality assurance – accreditation

Even though the quest for 'quality in education' may be embedded in higher education institutions, the rise of quality as a specific means for educational policy reflects a change in the political and governmental environment: a changing relationship between the state and the institutional field (van Damme 2000). Higher Education Institutions have been granted more autonomy on one hand, but are increasingly held accountable for their educational processes and more specifically for their outputs (Ranson, 2003). Quality assurance is considered as "part of the modernization process of public services." (Morley 2001: 465)

Responsibility for the quality of education that is provided lies with the higher education institution. But this responsibility and autonomy function within an almost archetypal landscape assembled of (competing) Higher Education Institutions, government regulations and often a government-independent national agency responsible for guarding quality assurance procedures. (see Soudien 2007; van Damme 2000)

This constellation shows us that quality, quality assurance and accreditation are closely linked, even though *quality* as such is seldom externally defined. This low degree of definition leads to a lack of international understanding in the field (van Damme 2000); but also to unimaginative and common sense solutions (Soudien 2007). Still, the link is made between concepts of quality (albeit implicit) and quality assurance approaches. But maybe it works more the other way around. Reversing the logic, this would imply that quality assurance systems influence the way we shape quality at institutional level. Precisely therein rests a strong point of criticism: that the choice for a specific quality assurance approach is not neutral and needs caution.

Even if there is international variety in quality assurance approaches, different authors point to the fact that there is a "tendency of convergence in international quality assurance systems" (van Damme 2000, see also Soudien 2007; Hay 2008). Some of the recurring elements in quality assurance approaches are (Soudien 2007: 7):

1. General: Mission and philosophy
2. Content: Substantive knowledge, intellectual skills, professional skills
3. Antecedents: Students (prior knowledge, entry requirements, pastoral care, other guidance), Faculty (qualifications and experience)
4. Transactions: Teaching, Learning, Research, Operational Issues
5. Outcomes: Immediate (graduation criteria) and intermediate (registration or certification and competence to practice)
6. Assessment: Programme (internal and external), students (assessment methods and criteria)
7. Physical aspects: resources (financial, facilities, equipment, supplies, intellectual, library, etc...), Personnel (administrative, clerical, technical, faculty)

However, this evolution towards convergence is not even favored by advocates of quality assurance procedures in education, let alone by the antagonists of it. Van Damme (2000: 16) warns for instance that "there are powerful historical and cultural differences between countries that can explain and justify variation

in quality assurance models. It is far from certain that a model that suits one country or region is also optimally suited for accommodating an academic environment in another country.”

Moreover, if we look at this discussion in a perspective of development and ‘switching the poles’, we cannot else but notice that some authors strongly criticize the predominance of a Western concept of quality. “The question remains, however, as Stetar (1999: 188) puts it, whether the quality assurance models that currently dominate higher education are ‘leading universities in developing countries toward a single, rather narrow Western definition of quality.’” (Soudien 2007: 7). Hay concludes, after 10 years of international networking on quality in Higher education (on geography), that this network has generated some undesirable side-effects. Assuming Anglo-American modes of educational standards and practice, reinforcing existing unequal/inequitable social relationships and the predominance of the English language have led to a factual exclusion of network-partners (Hay 2008).

Apart from the criticisms about quality and quality assurance as developed from a macro level in society, a lot of research focuses on the question how educational institutes respond to this call for quality, often called ‘the micropolitics of quality’.

1.4. Implementing a quality assurance system in a higher education institution

In the line of the previous paragraphs, the concern for quality and quality assurance has become more prominent and outspoken at the level of educational institutions. This change is mostly visible in the development of quality assurance procedures and visits and control by external agencies. Often higher education institutions are subject to different quality assurance procedures, for instance procedures with regards to education and procedures with regards to research.

The introduction of these procedures does not go uncontested. Even if a quality assurance system is implemented successfully, the implementation needs caution. Newton (2000) reports for instance about the (successful) implementation and management of a quality assurance system in a UK-based higher education institution, through a longitudinal ethnographic study. For 5 years, he was involved in a project established to design and implement a quality assurance system. He argues that the successful implementation of such a system requires attention for tensions in the institution and managing of these tensions. He distinguishes different factors affecting policy implementation and the management of change.

His main argument is that quality assurance is not ‘a blank sheet’; its implementation will be intertwined by organizational and cultural context. Every higher education institution presents its own (typical) combination of restraint and opportunities. In such a context, change happens not always as it is planned: there is also *emergent change*, influenced by the organizational context. In other words, the designed project will always differ from the eventual project. Newton therefore concludes that successful management needs alignment with the context, and that managers need to assume that they are not the only ones who can affect change. It is crucial to understand the context, the tensions, and to take perceptions of staff into account.

Some of the tensions managers may have to deal with in the implementation of a quality assurance system:

- 1) the divergence between views of external bodies and perceptions of staff;
- 2) the divergence between views of managers and views of the people that are managed;
- 3) differences between academic units;

- 4) an implementation gap between policy intentions and policy outcomes;
- 5) importance of *emergent* properties of the quality system versus the 'documented, dry' system;
- 6) accountability and improvement not reconcilable¹.

Subsequently, *main challenges* in the quality project are Newton (2000: 78)

- 1) effective leadership in support of change management efforts;
- 2) reconciling the demands of accountability and improvement;
- 3) alignment between 'philosophy', 'technology', and 'context';
- 4) sustaining the integrity of the quality system;
- 5) delivering measurable improvements for staff and students, and
- 6) implementing a system which delivered improved quality rather than merely an improved system.

To conclude, Newton comes back to the influence of context, the unpredictability of change and the absence of simple prescriptions for successfully managing change projects. This doesn't mean that managers cannot intervene, but Newton pleads for a reflective and self-evaluating stance among managers. The tensions cannot all be solved, but acknowledgement of them can be a basis for intervention.

1.5. The micropolitics of quality

Where Newton highlights some tensions, but sees them as quite manageable, other authors have conducted research into the power ramifications of quality assurance procedures. (Morley 2001, 2005; Simons & Masschelein 2006; Smith 2008) For this exercise, the concept of *micropolitics* is often used. It refers to the analysis that a specific policy interrelates with organizational cultures, professional roles and ideas, career possibilities within educational institutions and ... last but not least ... with the view on education that is projected. Morley argues for instance that the focus on quality installs a new 'regime of power'. Following the work of Foucault, an influential social scientist, *power* means the whole constellation of what a society or a community at a certain time considers as true, important, valuable and so on. A regime of power then stands for what all of us have, need and want to do in order to comply with this idea of power. Every regime of power creates opportunities but also constraints. That is precisely also what Morley and Smith document in their research. They report on one hand how unequal gender divisions in higher education are strengthened by quality assurance procedures; on the other hand it is made clear that this regime has created new career opportunities for some women. Quality assurance procedures, even though it is claimed that they are 'fair', objective and so on, are also prone to unfairness.

The implementation of the 'regime of quality' also has an impact on views on education and on professional roles and freedom for educationalists. Morley claims for instance that quality assurance procedures have the de-professionalisation of educationalists as a consequence, because (1) their discretionary space diminishes and (2) because bureaucratic criteria impose constraints on teaching practice. Some also wonder whether this climate of quality assurance and auditing still allows us to say that something is 'good enough'. (Simons & Masschelein 2006; Morley 2005) "Audit is based on a negative logic", states Morley, and she continues: "the discourse of continuous improvement creates an open-endedness that means that celebration and closure are inappropriate." Simons & Masschelein resume the question that is mostly dealt

¹ An interesting example of this irreconcilability is provided by Burns (1998). She warns for the distinction made between *assessment for improvement (formative)* and *assessment as quality assurance (summative)*. These two are not so different. Particularly, Burns' point is that formative evaluation still remains evaluation. Especially when it is documented on paper, it can always be (wrongfully) used in summative contexts. (Burns 1998)

with in a rhetoric manner: “Who could possibly be against quality (assurance)?” (2006: 301) They – as do many others – question the regime of quality that seems to reframe education to a service of which inputs and outcomes can be measured. Education, in their opinion, is not an enterprise.

Finally, it is argued that the cost of a focus on ‘quality’ is extremely high, on a national level, but also on an institutional level. Quite paradoxically, a lot of staff devote a lot of time to quality procedures, and have to leave their other work, what they conceive of as their real work, aside.

1.6. To conclude

It may be clear that quality and quality assurance in education do not go without problems. This does not mean that we cannot deal with the topic in LINQED. However, it may mean that we need to approach the topic and the eventual results we want to derive from it with caution. For instance, these are some of the points of caution we might want to take into account:

- There is very little definition of ‘quality’.
- We are warned not to develop a one-fits-all approach.
- We are urged to take context factors into account.

Bibliography

- Biesta, Gert (2007) Why "what works" won't work: evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research. *Educational Theory*, 57(1): 1-22.
- Burbules, Nicholas C (2004) Ways of thinking about Educational Quality. *Educational Researcher*, 33(6): 4–10.
- Burns, Candace (1998) Colonizing the Academy: Assessment, Accountability, and Quality. *Educational Policy*, 12(4): 419–431.
- Gillies, Donald (2008) Quality and equality: the mask of discursive conflation in education policy texts. *Journal of Education Policy*, 23(6): 685–699.
- Hay, Iain (2008) Postcolonial Practices for a Global Virtual Group: The Case of the International Network for Learning and Teaching Geography in Higher Education (INLT), *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 32(1), 15–32.
- Morley, Louise (2001) Subjected to review: engendering quality and power in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(5): 465–478.
- Morley, Louise (2005) The micropolitics of quality. *Critical quarterly*, 47(1–2): 83–95.
- Newton, J. (2000) Quality systems in higher education: managing change, managing tensions. *SAJHE/SATHO*, 14(2): 75–84.
- Ranson, Stewart (2003) Public accountability in the age of neo-liberal governance. *Journal of Education Policy*, September-October 2003, 18(5): 459-80.
- Saunders, Mark N.K. & Williams, Christine S. (2005) From evaluation towards an agenda for quality improvement: The development and application of the Template Process. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 6(1): 60–72.
- Simons, Maarten & Masschelein, Jan (2006) The Permanent Quality Tribunal in Education and the Limits of Education Policy. *Policy Futures in Education*, 4(3): 292–305.
- Simons, Maarten (2001) Quality–assurance and education: the 'will to quality' in a changed governmental strategy. Article in Dutch: *Kwaliteitszorg in het onderwijs: de 'wil tot kwaliteit' in een gewijzigd veld van bestuurlijkheid*. *Pedagogiek*, 21(2): 106-123.
- Smith, Jayne (2008) Quality assurance and gender discrimination in English universities: an investigation. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(6): 623–638.
- Soudien, Crain (2007) Quality assurance in higher education and the management of South Africa's past: Some paradoxes. *Perspectives in Education*, 25(3), September 2007, 12p.

Sutherland, Lee (2007) Policy, pragmatic, and problems in quality in higher education. *Perspectives in Education*, 25(3): 1–11.

van Damme, Dirk (2000) European approaches to quality assurance: models, characteristics and challenges. *SAJHE/SATHO*, 14(2): 10–19.