

Exploring how Academics Perceive the Impact of Quality Audit on their Work: A Case Study of a Research-Intensive Pre-1992 University in England

Abstract

This paper reports on a case study of how academics in England perceive the impact and effects of quality audit on their work. It draws on data from substantial public document analysis and 64 interviews with academics from 7 different subjects in a research – intensive pre-1992 university in England, exploring how the quality audit has affected the general workload of academic, undergraduate classroom teaching practice, curriculum and power relation between academics and students. The findings reveal that the quality audit is perceived to have changed the work of the academics in both positive and negative ways. The audit is considered to have contributed in some degree to the increased workload of the academics, but with little impact on the curriculum. There is a concern that the quality audit could potentially reverse the power relation between the academics and the students in future.

Introduction

In England, audit has become a main way to ensure that higher education institutions (HEIs) are providing higher education, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and that institutions are exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner (QAA, 2002). There are various factors contributing to this quality audit in England:

- The changed relationship between the State and the HEIs. It develops from an exchange relationship to a sponsorship-dependency relationship from the world wars to 1989 (Henkel and Little, 1999). Now the State becomes an investor in higher education (Taggart, 2004);
- The expansion of British higher education (Kogan, et al, 2000) which has caused some changes in resources allocation to universities, especially the transformation of the funding regime (Taggart, 2004);
- The increased pressure upon the HEIs for accountability and efficiency in the use of public funds (Johnson, 2000);
- The shift from collegiality to managerialism in the management of the institution (Dearlove, 1997).

This paper explores how academics in England perceive the impact and effects of the quality audit on their work. According to Power (1994, 1999), audit is ‘control of control’. It means that the audited organisations develop their own internal system of control, and that the external audit process concentrates on checking these controls. This paper thus explores the perceived impact of the quality audit through examining how quality assurance mechanisms upon and within the institution have affected the work of academics.

Research Methodology

This paper draws on data from a case study of a research – intensive pre - 1992 university in England where 64 interviews with academics from seven different subjects were conducted. Meanwhile, substantial documents were collected and analysed. These interviews were semi-structured and took place from January to April 2005, addressing two research questions:

- What perceived impact has the external quality assurance mechanism had on the work of academics?
- What perceived impact has the internal quality assurance mechanism within the institution had on the work of academics?

The external quality assurance mechanisms studied include the institutional audit, the benchmark statements, program specification, external examining, professional, regulatory and statutory body (PSRB) review, and the 2005 National Student Survey (NSS). The internal quality assurance mechanisms within my case university explored are annual program review, approval system for new and revised programs, peer observation and student course evaluation.

Impact and Effect of Quality Audit on the Work of Academics

Research reports that quality audit has become a source of controversy, because underlying its operation are issues of powers and values (Brennan and Shah, 2000). The arguments on deleterious effects of teaching quality audit reveals that the audit has caused increased workload, distrust of academics, and lack of improvement in quality of teaching and learning (Gosling and D’Andrea, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Kogan *et al.*

2000; Morley, 2003; Newton, 2000, 2002; Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). Drawn on this research, this case study examines the perceived impact of quality audit on four aspects of academic work: the general workload, undergraduate classroom teaching practice, curriculum, and power relation between academics and students, which will be discussed as follow.

Workload of Academics

The workload of academics in the UK has generated a voluminous collection of findings, such as Kinman and Jones (2003), Kinman, et al. (2006), and Morley (2003). These surveys all report that academics in the UK normally work more than 40 hours a week, in spite of the differences of university and subject, and that this long working hour has caused the imbalance of teaching, research and administration. According to Morley (2003), the internalised imperative of the academics to work longer time reveals the psychic life of power, and that the quality audit has contributed to the academics' increased workload in Britain. In contrast, Kinman and Jones (2003) and Kinman, et al. (2006) suggest that it is hard to tell the connection between academics' over workload and the quality audit, and that some other factors could have contributed to this work overload, such as, the expansion of higher education, job insecurity in the higher education sector since 1998, particularly that related to short-term contracts and an increasing threat of redundancies within universities.

The theme of heavy workload also appeared in my case study. Sixty five per cent of respondents were not satisfied with their workload, and found it hard to balance their teaching, research, and administration. However, very few respondents perceived the quality assurance job as a major cause to their heavy workload. Teaching, research, administration and quality assurance jobs were considered to have resulted in the increased workloads. For example, a female lecturer in medical related science found it difficult to balance her teaching, research and administration:

I feel ... the workload is very high (laughter)... I tried... to, (balance teaching, research and administration) but I find that I ended up on focusing on one thing ... for a while, then I will focus on something else, but I am not sure that ... I have got the balance right. (Respondent 35)

Except for teaching and research, administrative work was another important factor contributing to the respondents' heavy workload. A male senior lecturer in a science related course complained about his unanticipated administrative jobs:

... I feel a little bit pushed by administration at the moment. ... It turns out more to be anticipated, when I accepted the role of departmental radiation (Respondent 13).

There were various ways for the respondents to deal with their workload. Some worked outside their normal office hours, or chose to become workaholic. A female part-time lecturer in politics said that she managed to cope with her heavy workload by becoming a workaholic:

I am workaholic, which means I work ten hours a day which means that ... at the weekend, I am in office. (pause) and I really like it. (Respondent 37)

Undergraduate Classroom Teaching Practice

Research reveals that the views on the impact of quality audit on teaching are mixed. On one hand, there is a wide criticism that quality audit undermines the quality of teaching and learning that they are designed to monitor and promote (Goslingi and D'Andrea, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Morley, 2003; Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). On the other hand, there is evidence that increased attention has been given towards the quality of teaching as a result of the external assessments in the UK (Brennan et al., 1997). There are more active discussions and co-operation within academic units, and a more clarified responsibility for improving teaching and student learning and the provision of better information on best practice (Dill, 2000). Similarly, respondents in this case study held different views on the impact of the quality audit on their undergraduate teaching. Fifty three per cent respondents felt that the quality audit had not made any or much difference on their teaching practice. Forty per cent respondents held that the quality audit had achieved some positive impacts on their teaching. Six per cent respondents had neutral attitude to the quality audit and conceived it having both negative and positive impact on their teaching practice. One per cent respondents refused to make comment on the impact of the quality audit on their teaching.

The external quality assurance mechanisms were perceived to have had little impact on the respondents' undergraduate classroom teaching practice. For example, a male lecturer in geographical studies found that programme specification had not made any difference to what he did:

... I don't think so. I think ... it (programme specification) just regulates it (undergraduate teaching) a bit more. It gives me basis to come back and check... I am doing what I say I do, but I don't think it makes a huge difference ... to what you actually do. (Respondent 37)

The majority of the respondents knew nothing or heard little about the subject benchmark statement produced by the QAA. Most respondents regarded the external examining system as a friendly, helpful and professional system in maintaining the quality of the institution, but there was no perceived impact of the examining system on their undergraduate teaching practice. The 2005 National Student Survey was widely criticised because of its flawed methods, such as, the poor quality of data collected, and the method of combing the survey results of two different departments together. The majority of the respondents felt that this survey had not had and would not have any impact on their individual teaching practice. When asked why the external quality assurance mechanisms had had such little impact on their teaching, some respondents pointed out that their teaching practice was actually closely related to their motivation and interest in their subjects, and that it had nothing to do with the quality assurance mechanisms. For example, when asked about the impact of the annual programme review on teaching, a male professor in a medical related course replied:

I don't think it has. I mean my teaching is self-motivated. ... I teach, because I am interested in the subject area and I think ... my teaching style is based upon ... mixture of things. (Respondent 50)

However, some other respondents held different views that the quality audit was useful in keeping academics on their track and in making academics think about their teaching. Of the quality assurance mechanisms, the one frequently mentioned was the QAA. One male lecturer in computer studies argued that:

I think it (QAA) has made people ... think about their teaching... And it would be naïve to say that ... everything was perfect, because I don't think it was. And I think perhaps ... it was bad practice, if you like. I wasn't particular aware of a lot of it, but I think what QAA does is to make you think about it... a bit more..., and make sure that you are doing And you are quite lucky in this department, and nobody ... gives bad lectures and I think it keeps you on your toe, if you like. ... And I don't see anything wrong with that ..., and I think it is a good idea ... (respondent 12)

Among the respondents, there was a view that the quality audit had to some extent contributed to the diversity of their teaching styles. For example, a male lecturer in a science related course found that his teaching styles enriched:

To some extent, because I started ... two and a half years ago. ... There are quite a lot of changes since you organise the, you diversified the style of teaching, and previously, it was just lectures. Practical dimensions, but not really practical classes.... And that is where we start some seminars, we may use external speakers... including from industry. We make great use of the self education, the project with students do,... previously being more or less of an essay, to let more interacting, involves more group work... (Respondent 37)

Among the internal quality assurance mechanisms, the peer observation and the student course evaluation were perceived to have achieved the most impact on the academics' undergraduate classroom teaching practice. Wilson *et al.*'s(1997) empirical study confirms that the student course evaluation is a valid, reliable and a useful indicator of teaching quality, with the capacity of providing crucial information about course quality. Similarly, this case study reveals that most respondents found the student course evaluation useful in reminding them of their shortcomings, stopping their bad teaching practice, helping them take their students' need and interest into consideration in teaching, and improving their way of delivering the lectures. A male reader in a science related course said he personally improved his lecture due to the student course evaluation:

I think there is improvement of lectures. ... Particularly, personal perspective, we reduced the slides ... and the amount of information ... that we try to get into lectures now, based on student comments. ...I reduced the slides ... but increased the number of lectures, which I was giving, so I spread the work over ... an increase number of lectures, so ... previously I was doing six and now I spread that ... over nine lectures, so this is the same information, but ... over more lectures. (Respondent 6)

From the perspectives of the respondents, the peer observation not only diversified their teaching style but also helped them gain confidence in their teaching. There was also a view that the peer observation could help change some minor things of the teaching practice. One young female lecturer in politics studies commends that:

I have changed minor things. One is ... one of the things I picked up was ... the discussion in the seminar is a sort of ... free flowing and I don't ... try to interrupt it... as little as possible. Most of the students, you know,... they can manage

their discussion, but sometimes some students feel like ... you say something ... when their discussion is going on. (Respondent 25)

However, the respondents tended to perceive the student evaluation as more useful than the peer observation in improving their teaching practice. One reason is the peer observation was relatively complimentary. For example, a male lecturer in a medical related course explained that the student evaluation was more likely to reveal his teaching inadequacy:

Personally, I tend to take more notice of what the students say... than what the peer say. ...The students are more inclined to ... find the inadequacies.... Students would comment far more about the content...,while, peer review is ... purely ... how you handle the class and how did you deal with the information ... of trying to ... bringing over and that is mechanics, where the student would be much more critical of ..., without seeing the relevance of this, therefore, next year, you see that ... aspects of important, you try to.... spend a little more time introducing it and explaining... why it is relevant and etc... and sometimes you question whether it is relevant, so students feedback is far more... influential in altering ...the way you teach than ... the peer review sessions. (Respondent 45)

Curriculum

Curriculum, a major term in the language of higher education, is closely related to teaching. Barnett's research on changing patterns of undergraduate curricula in the UK conceptualises key patterns of change in the curriculum, and proposes models for configuring the main components of curricula (Barnett, 2000, Barnett, et al., 2001, and Barnett and Coate, 2005). Barnett argues that the academic hegemony is dissolving, and that the curriculum has become market-oriented, customerised, and outcome-based, due to the increasing influence of outside interests. One influence is the massification of the higher education in the UK. The other influence is England's QAA which has made curriculum under scrutiny, and has led the curriculum move from subject-based to outcome-based (ibid). This case study examines whether the quality audit has had some impact on the curriculum from the perception of the academics and produces four main findings in below:

Firstly, different respondents perceived curriculum differently. Some viewed it as what was taught in the individual unit or subject, and articulated in the unit outline, whereas others considered it as a programme of study that encompasses multiple units. These different views on curricular are similar to Fraser and Bosanquet's (2006) findings that there are a variety of definitions and meanings attributed to the term curriculum in a higher education context. Secondly, there was a common view that the professional, regulatory and statutory bodies (PRSBs), on behalf of the Government, would control and validate the curricular of some vocationally orientated awards. The examples were that the PRSBs decided subjects to be covered, programmes to be taught and standards to be met up, and that the PRSBs prescribed the content of their curricula, and checked teaching content, student assessment, and knowledge requirement to students. The PRSBs were thus perceived to have had significant impact on the curriculum, but this impact varied with the subjects. Generally speaking, respondents from medical related course were likely to consider the PRSBs have more impact on their curriculum than those from computer related course. For example, a male professor from a medical related course found that the PRSBs greatly controlled the programmes taught in his school:

Well, they license their practice, so the whole reason for the programme is to produce ... xxx who license the practice. And the RCVS set certain programmes to be taught and ... certain standards must be met up. Non negotiable. They have visitation to school of xxx. It is dominant ... driving force. (Respondent 50)

In contrast, respondents from a computer related course found that the British Computer Society have little impact on their curriculum. For example, a male senior lecturer comments that:

I would say, very little. (pause) I think, we find them, ... slightly, irritating. Again, in the sense that, again, what we are supposed to do is ... we design our programmes ... as we see them, and check whether it matches the DCS things. ... See what I mean? Rather than the other way around. Sometimes it wants something in our programme that is not explicating ... and we have to find a way to convince them. for example, they want evidence that ... we covered... the professional ethics. We did have a unit called professional ethics ... and we tend to do that ... in unit and we have to convince them that there is sufficient material in the units ... that covered that, which is ... to be honest, slightly irritating. Not very useful. (Respondent 20)

These different views on the PRSBs could be explained by the fact that computer science is such a fast developing subject that some requirement from its PRSBs might become outdated quickly, and thus the respondents in computer related course might find it irritating. However, the medical related course is usually

concerned with health and safety. The requirement from its PRSBs is therefore more likely to become standardised and is compulsory to observe. Thirdly, the other quality assurance mechanisms explored were perceived by the respondents to have had minor impact on the curriculum, which suggests that the academic hegemony in shaping the curriculum is still dominating in the context of the quality audit.

Fourthly, the manager academic respondents held more positive attitude towards the impact of the quality assurance mechanism on curriculum than the academic respondents. One example is that most academic respondents found the programme specification produced by the QAA superficial, but some manager academic respondents found it a useful practice. For example, a senior manager in engineering argued that the programme specification would make the academics become proactive in changing the curriculum:

I suppose I am bit more analytical, but I suppose it has alerted colleagues the opportunity the sort of being more proactive in making change in the curriculum. Prior to that I think it was just sort of accepted programmes were there just went from year to year. (Respondent 51)

This contrasts the academic respondents' views that the programme specification had not had much impact on the curriculum. A female senior lecturer, as well as a programme director, in politics studies explained that it was the curriculum that affected the specification, not vice versa:

NO! The programme specification follows the curriculum. ... Do you see what I mean? Intellectual issues and practical issues drive ... the curriculum and the paper work ... we just fill it in and say what we have done. ... do you know what I mean?... It is not like, it doesn't go the other way around. (Respondent 30)

These different attitudes towards curricula could be explained by the different position of the respondents possessed within the institution. The manager academic respondents were more likely to be more supportive of the requirement by the quality audit.

Power Relations Between Academics and Students

The expansion of the higher education, the adoption of top-up fee, and the prevalence of the student course evaluation have raised a concern that the pedagogic relationship will be transformed into a commercial transaction (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2003, 2005). The student course evaluation is perceived as a new device to curb the power of academics and challenge the intellectual oligarch (Morley, 2003). Johnson (2000) argues that the motives for installing student course evaluation in educational contexts are neither educationally sound nor focused on the fulfilment of the goals of either teachers or students, because the evaluation exists primarily to serve the needs of the bureaucracy in order to fulfil relatively shallow notions of what teaching quality represents. There is a view that the students are not in a position to evaluate their teachers' performance because their evaluation would depend on their own sense of comfort and satisfaction which would as a result encourage the teaching of less challenging material and the avoidance by teachers of processes that may give rise to high level learning. These arguments reveal a concern among the academics that the evaluation represents a new source of authority that has changed the balance of power within academic institutions (Moore and Kuol, 2005).

On examining whether the quality audit has changed the power relation between academics and students, this case reveals that two third respondents thought that the academics still had the power over the students in spite of all the evaluation processes, partly because academics knew more about the subjects and they were in charge of the marking, but the academics had become more responsive to the needs of the students. A male senior lecturer felt that it would take a while to change this power relation:

Well, I think it (change of power relationship between academic and students) is hard to tell. Over the year, students have more feel about ... what to control what happens. They feel that ... they want to get value for money. And I think we are taking more notice ... of what the students say now, than we used to. It is just long term trend. ... I don't think it makes individual changes. We used to say: 'we know best and we don't need you tell what to do.' and we are in control. ... You do what we tell you. Now, it is quite a long way,... the other way around. (Respondent 21)

Meanwhile, there was an assumption among the respondents that the power relation between academics and students would change in the future, maybe towards becoming more equal. However, there were various attitudes towards this potential change. Some respondents argued that it would remove some bad teaching practices because students wanted more clarity. For example, a female lecturer in philosophy related course gave an example that:

Err, ... for example, I have seen ... students complaining bitterly ... year on year ... about a certain lecturer, who give terrible lectures. And nothing happened. ... I think in future, they will be able to, say: 'look, something has to happen.' ... I think their view is less likely to be ignored. (Respondent 56)

In contrast, there was fear among some other respondents that if the power relation between the academic and the student changed, the students would become more demanding, in terms of lectures, units, style of lectures, pastoral care, and etc. One male lecturer in computer related courses argued that students had already become more vocal about what they wanted. He showed a concern that this together with the top-up fee in English universities would make the students think that they were paying for a degree instead of education:

For example, I had an email from a student, complaining about the grade, and asking for feedback... on why she got low grade.... You know, they are actually actively questioning, and I think we are going to see a lot more of that. ... Students are actually saying no, I am paying now and it is expecting kind of services. I think the danger is when students start flipping, from thinking that ... they are paying for education to ... the notion of paying for a degree. When they don't get a degree result they want, they thought then: 'we are paying for it'. (Respondent 19)

There was a worry that academics were taking students more seriously, but the students began to show less respect to the academics. Some respondents feared that the changing power relation would make the academics become secondary to the students. A female lecturer gave an example of students treating her like secondary:

... I got email from my students. ... Sometimes even five questions in the email. Usually, I am not sure about ... content, either should I conceptualise what sort of soul right now, and when it is deadline, ... or how should I reference bibliography? And these are all in the handout ... and some materials ... provided to the students ... in the syllabus as well. Then you will get these kinds of questions ... which students can't bother to cross check the syllabus, or to check the website, ... or to check the handbook. They use me ... as a short hand ... for data. (Respondent 44)

Conclusion

This case study suggests that the process of the quality audit has changed the work of the academics in both positive and negative ways. Some perceived positive changes are the diversified teaching style and the increased awareness of good teaching among the academics. However, the quality audit has contributed to certain degree to the increase of the academic workload, but with little impact on the change of the curriculum. There is a perception that the quality audit might help change the power relation with academic and students. It is important to recognise the issues of academic work in the context of the quality audit, because academics are key stakeholders in higher education. Understanding and taking the academics' perceptions into account could help to improve the quality of higher education which is the key aim of the quality audit movement.

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