CHAPTER TEN

THE POLITICS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

AN UNSTABLE POLICY ISSUE

The central purpose of this chapter is to analyse the politics of quality assurance in British higher education from 1992 to 2005. The 1992 The Further and Higher Education Act obliged the Funding Councils to make provision ‘for assessing the quality of education provided in institutions for whose activities they provide’ and, to this end, it required them to ‘establish a committee, to be known as the Quality Assessment Committee, with the function of giving them advice on the discharge of their duty … ’ (Further and Higher Education Act 1988: clauses 70a, 70b). Quality assurance procedures were deeply and harmoniously embedded in British higher education long before 1992, but since then have generated protracted political controversy.

The period is so politically rich because continuous conflict has enveloped all the dimensions of quality assurance: its meaning and purpose, how it was to be evaluated and whose responsibility this should be. In his Foreword to Roger Brown’s Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The UK Experience since 1992 (2004), John Stoddart (Chairman of the Higher Education Quality Council, 1992–97) writes:

The issue at the heart of the quality debate, therefore, is not whether higher education should be subject to evaluation and assessment but who should do it, how it should be done, what criteria should be used and what sanctions might be deployed if what is assessed is found wanting (Stoddart 2004: p. x).

There was a regulatory regime in place (indeed there was a statutory requirement that there should be a regulatory regime) but it was not constructed on the basis of a broad consensus and, consequently, remained fragile, subject to political attack from a range of different interests.

Until very recently it was possible to draw an interesting contrast between the quality assurance and the research assessment regimes. Since its inauguration in 1986 the Research Assessment Exercise has not lacked its ardent critics but its evaluative methodology has remained essentially intact. It was a question of refining its procedures rather than replacing it with alternative models for evaluating research quality and distributing research income. The recent Roberts Review of the RAE had recommended a significant methodological change (in which HEIs could exclude themselves from the review process) but it seems as if we are moving towards RAE 2008 with substantially the established model in place. However, it is evident that RAE 2008 will be the last to take place under the old rules and henceforth research evaluation will be heavily dependent upon a yet-to-be-finalised system of
metrics. But it is still pertinent to ask why from 1992 quality assurance was such a politically contentious issue whereas the same degree of turbulence has only just enveloped research assessment.

This examination of the maelstrom of quality assurance is not meant to present a definitive history, which others have accomplished (for contrasting interpretations of the history see, Brown, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Watson, 2005). The intention is to focus upon the political struggles generated by the attempt to establish a regulatory framework of quality assurance with broad institutional support. Why has this been so difficult to achieve? What were the major obstacles to establishing a regulatory regime that all the significant interests could embrace? The recently instigated ‘light-touch’ regulatory regime appears to have brought about a period of political calm, but for long? What ground did the various interests have to concede to bring this to fruition? And, critically, what does this tell us about the distribution and employment of power in the development of higher education policy?

AN IDEOLOGICALLY DIVIDED DISCOURSE

Any accountability procedures ‘… must incorporate the three functions of standard setting, the monitoring and evaluation of activity against those standards, and intervention in the light of the evaluation’ (Salter and Tapper, 2000: p. 72). Thus, regardless of the purpose of quality control (either to measure and compare institutional performance, to audit institutional quality assurance mechanisms, or to stimulate quality enhancement) there were three interrelated levels of regulation that the dominant interests in higher education would struggle to control. The problem that the state faced is that, whereas the measurement of research excellence evolved in substantially virgin territory (notwithstanding the entrenched academic value that quality could be determined only by peer review), the evaluation of teaching and learning in higher education was already entrapped in a well-spun web of ideas and procedures. A range of entrenched values and associated vested interests had to be confronted if change were to occur.

The frequently supportive public reaffirmation of the need for ‘evaluation and assessment’ by the major institutional academic interests (as noted by Stoddart) has disguised a great deal of personal antipathy. In the eyes of many there was not a clear-cut distinction between ensuring the quality of the learning process and controlling what was taught and those who taught it. These fears were exacerbated as the debate expanded to incorporate the ideas of benchmarking and threshold standards. To many the quality control allegedly secured by the tradition of external examiners seemed more than adequate given that it was an elite system, centred around single-honours degrees, recruited students who for the most part met the A-level gold standard, and hired faculty who had completed, or were about to complete, their doctorates in a narrow disciplinary field and, moreover, whose job applications had been supported by those you often knew and whose judgements you trusted.