auditing as a tool of public policy:
The misuse of quality assurance techniques in the UK university expansion

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Over recent years, UK universities have undergone a government-driven expansion of their student intake, with a target of fifty per cent of each age cohort graduating with a degree. The aim was to increase the average educational standard of the UK educational system as a whole - albeit at the cost of reducing the average academic standard within the university sector (Smith and Webster, 1997; Charlton, 2002).

The combination of necessarily reduced student selectivity (both in admissions and examinations) and substantially reduced funding per student created the problem of how to manage the decline in academic standards and inflation of the degree qualification. After some years of trying more informal methods (Williams, 1997), the government set-up the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education; QAA, 1998), which would use the managerial tool of quality assurance auditing.

Yet the QAA is now regarded as a failed experiment - expensive, damaging to efficiency, and probably ineffective (THES, 2001; Baty, 2001). This failure is now widely accepted by all parties including the government and the QAA - although the nature of the failure and suggested response vary widely between total abolition and reform with enhancement.

We explore the formal nature and constraints of auditing, and describe the way in which these constraints were disregarded under the pressure of political expediency and public relations hype that misrepresented the proper function of a national teaching inspectorate.

**EDUCATION FOR GROWTH**

The need for continually increased levels of mass intellectual education is a consequence of the need for continual economic growth and increasing social differentiation in order for modern societies to sustain themselves (Luhmann, 1995). Indeed, modern societies are actually characterised by growth - by achieved continual growth and by the expectation of future growth (Gellner, 1983). And this imperative towards growth and differentiation characterises the education system just as it does the economic, political and legal systems, because any static or contracting system will tend to become dominated by other
growing systems (Maturana and Varela, 1980; Luhmann, 1995).

Growth generates rapid change in social organisation and individual functions. So, in a modernising society, the purpose of education is to produce enough people with sufficient generic intellectual capabilities to allow them to be trained and retrained for a wide range of functions. In other words, the educational output should be advanced generalists capable of, and motivated for, rapid and flexible specialisation (Gellner, 1983). This implies the need for as high as possible a level of formal education, or 'literacy and numeracy', for as many of the population as possible (given the constraints of competing claims on resources and time). This can be summarised in the statement that modernisation implies continually raising the average level of intellectual skills in the population.

As well as the need for high-level literacy and numeracy skills, maximising flexibility in the intellectual workforce implies that there be a common language of communication and a common intellectual culture, so that individuals can perform a wide range of functions and be easily inter-changeable (Gellner, 1983). Many of the requirements of a modern economy could be described as a 'socialisation' for 'employability'. It has been suggested that the large measurable economic advantage derived from each incremental lengthening of the educational experience may be due to formal education contributing to 'incentive-enhancing preferences' (Bowles and Gintis, 2000). In sum, university graduates make more functional employees that require less supervision and are more responsive to the incentives of the workplace. Graduates have - in a word - better 'attitude'.

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ECONOMIC DRIVES TOWARDS EDUCATIONAL EXPANSION

From the economic perspective, the function of the educational system is to provide the kind of skilled manpower necessary to maintain continual economic growth. Whereas in traditional societies there was only a small literate class, the specialised complexity of modern societies has greatly increased the need for communication (because more specialisation entails more co-ordination; Kindler and Kiss, 1969; Pokol, 1991; Luhmann, 1995). In a modern society, therefore, essentially all the population need to be literate and numerate at a basic level, and the higher the level of literacy and numeracy this mass of population can attain, the greater the complexity (hence efficiency) of communication which can be supported.

Economic growth is essentially a product of the progressive division and specialisation of labour (Gellner, 1988; Wright, 2000). But the specialisation of economic function in a modern society differs from that in traditional societies (Gellner, 1983). In traditional societies there was very little general education for most of the population, and specialised education (apprenticeship) was very prolonged, leading to a lifetime of dedicated practice. The result was that the level of skill of masons, woodcarvers, jewellers etc.