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***THE ORIGINS, OPERATION
AND IMPACTS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE
IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION
1985-2004***

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***Thesis submitted in
fulfilment of the
requirements of the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

The thesis explores the origins of government concerns about the quality of UK higher education during the 1980s and traces legislative processes leading to the reform acts of 1988 and 1992. It demonstrates close links between higher education reforms and Conservative policies in the rest of the public sector and shows how quality assurance was used as an instrument of regulation to increase government control over the universities during the next decade. These developments coincided with the rise of a higher education 'market' in which quality assessment scores were translated into league tables to attract students as 'customers'. The narrative then shows how the issue of student fees increasingly came to dominate the Labour government's thinking from 1997 onwards and became a major theme in debates leading to the higher education act of 2004.

The chronological narrative based on historical accounts and contemporary documents identifies four successive phases of quality assurance between 1992 and 2004. This is combined with a qualitative study which uses a constructivist approach to build up a picture of the unsettled period that followed the introduction of quality assurance systems into universities. A wide range of views from contemporary literature were supplemented by a series of ten semi-structured interviews with individuals who played significant roles in these events and reported their experiences in their own words.

The narrative traces the growth of a quality 'industry' in higher education and a long-running 'quality debate' among those affected by its impacts. Difficulties of defining 'quality' and the political desire for quantitative measurement led to the adoption of unsuitable methodology, emphasising accountability at the expense of improvement. This turbulent period was characterised by a recurring pattern of rising protests from academics which culminated in political intervention and subsequently further change. The thesis analyses the effects of quality assurance on university staff and students and on the developing discourse between higher education and the state. Summarising its impacts in a balance sheet of pros and cons leads to the conclusion that though concerns about quality were justified and some form of regulation was necessary in the expanded and diverse sector, the results of audit and assessment revealed little cause for concern about the quality of UK higher education. Furthermore, though quality assurance produced some benefits in the organisation of courses, staff development and information for prospective students, there was little evidence of benefits to teaching itself. Thus, quality assurance failed to deliver the government's own aim of value for money, and the effort and time

required by the universities could have been put to better use; less insistence on regulation could have given academics more freedom to pursue improvements in teaching. A brief epilogue reflects on the status of quality assurance in 2015 and warns that separate plans for reform announced by HEFCE and the current government risk repeating old mistakes.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contributions of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAU	Academic Audit Unit
AUT	Association of University Teachers
BTEC	Business and Technician Education Council
CBI	Confederation on British Industry
CE	Chief Executive
CNAA	Council for National Academic Awards
CVCP	Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals
DAT	Discipline Audit Trail
DES	Department of Education and Science
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FHEA	Further and Higher Education Act
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GMA	General Medical Council
FHEA	Further and Higher Education Act
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Council
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspector(ate)
IoD	Institute of Directors
ILO	Intended Learning Outcome
ILTHE	Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
ITT	Initial Teacher Training
JPG	Joint Planning Group
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NHS	National Health Service
NSS	National Student Survey
NUS	National Union of Students
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
OIA	Office of the Independent Adjudicator
PCFC	Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council
PSRB	Professional and Statutory Regulatory Body
QA	Quality Assurance
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
QAF	Quality Assurance Framework
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
SHEFC	Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
SRHE	Society for Research into Higher Education
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
THES	<i>Times Higher Education Supplement</i>
TQA	Teaching Quality Assessment
TQM	Total Quality Management
UFC	Universities Funding Council
UGC	University Grants Committee

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

'Quality is a slippery word' (Ball, 1989: 2).

1.1 *'The Quest for Quality'*

During the latter part of the 20th century, the challenges of expanding student numbers while simultaneously reducing costs gave rise to common concerns among governments in the UK and elsewhere about whether the quality of higher education could be maintained. One difficulty in tackling this problem, however, was that there was little consensus about what 'quality' actually meant (Barnett, 1992). Based on his experience in the Netherlands, Vroeijenstijn (1992: 112) vividly expressed this perplexity: 'quality is like love... Everybody knows and feels when there is love. Everybody recognises it. But when we try to give a definition of it, we are standing with empty hands'.

1.2 *Starting points*

My interest in this topic goes back to my own experience in 1994 when I undertook some research at the University of Glasgow on the development of quality assurance in UK universities. As part of a Diploma in Adult Education, the investigation focused mainly on how far the quality assurance systems then being implemented were applicable to open continuing education courses. An abridged version of the resulting dissertation, entitled *'The Quest for Quality'* was later published in the *Scottish Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* (Kuenssberg, 1997). I was subsequently appointed Quality Assurance Officer in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education, with a remit to develop systems suitable for the widely differing areas of its provision. In particular, I worked with colleagues to develop a quality assurance framework appropriate for a programme of part-time credit-bearing courses being introduced in the period 1995-98. The implementation of this major change programme was reported in the same journal (Kuenssberg and Turner, 1999).

My original dissertation and first-hand experience of the early days of quality assurance led me to identify a number of fundamental questions which I was keen to pursue when I returned to research in 2008 after a 10-year career change. During that early period I had found 'a prevailing atmosphere of confusion' among academics who were first bewildered by the duplication of quality assurance processes and, as time went on, increasingly angry

at the time and effort involved in shouldering this bureaucratic burden (Kuenssberg, 1997: 37). Many resented this external intervention which they viewed as government-imposed infringement of their academic freedom. I was eager to explore further why ‘quality’ had become part of the political agenda in the first place. I also wanted to find out how this ‘quality debate’ had continued and how the emerging trends I had identified had developed.

1.3 *Motivation for the PhD study*

Thus, my original motivation for this new study was personal curiosity – to revisit a previous area of interest. In many ways I was well qualified to undertake the study. I had a professional background in adult education and experience of quality assurance from two angles: on the receiving end as a teacher in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education and having staff responsibility for implementing it. Through my earlier research I was already familiar with the documents and literature that had begun to accumulate around the theme of ‘quality’ from the start – a tide of official reports, handbooks and guidelines on quality assurance, numerous books and articles in which academics discussed emerging issues and a stream of press comment on the developing controversies. This material and subsequent publications would provide material for ongoing research. I remembered who were the major players in the world of quality assurance and had retained some personal connections which might guide my choice of interviewees for this research.

The quality of higher education was and remains a vitally important issue for students and for the country. Quality assurance was highly controversial in the years following its implementation and caused considerable upheaval in the universities. In the light of these consequences, it seemed important to investigate what difference it had actually made and whether the benefits were worth the effort.

1.4 *Knowledge gaps*

In considering a focus for my PhD study, I became aware of certain gaps in the literature produced during the early years after the introduction of quality assurance. Harvey and Williams (1997) pointed out that there was little significant research into the impact of quality assurance processes in universities in comparison with the number of studies

devoted to policy and the activities of external agencies. Brennan and Shah (2000: 9) agreed that literature on the development of quality assurance had thus far tended to focus on national and institutional levels but there had been few studies about its impact at grass-roots level. This would be a fertile field to explore and the longer time lapse since the introduction of quality assurance would give a clearer view of its effects on the universities and those who worked and studied there.

1.5 *Purpose of the PhD study*

The overall purpose of this study was therefore to understand the phenomenon of quality assurance and the role it played in the reforms of UK higher education between the Conservative Green Paper of 1985 and Labour's Higher Education Act of 2004.

1.6 *Research questions*

I developed three broad questions which defined the scope and direction of the research:

- Why was quality assurance introduced into UK universities during the 1990s?
- How did it operate?
- What were its impacts on the higher education sector?

It was clear that this project would embrace several spheres for research and would require a number of methods and techniques. An essential first step in producing a history was to establish a chronological framework in order to understand the sequence of events.

Examination of policy and legislation would provide a basis for understanding the government's aims in instigating the higher education reforms. Analysis of the theory and practice of quality assurance would be necessary both to assess its pros and cons as an instrument for the regulation of higher education and to understand its effects on people and relationships. In this study information from written sources would be augmented by interviews with key senior individuals who had direct experience of the events. I planned to create a 'balance sheet' of the benefits and disadvantages of quality assurance that had become apparent during the study to crystallise the findings and help to reach verdicts about its overall impacts.

Adopting this approach guided the formulation of a number of 'sub-questions' which were adapted to become the questions for a series of semi-structured interviews:

- What happened when?
- How far was the introduction of quality assurance linked with government policies of the time?
- How appropriate was quality assurance as an instrument to assess the quality of teaching and learning?
- How did the higher education sector react to the introduction of quality assurance?
- What changes took place in universities as a result of its introduction?

This initial thinking enabled me to define the major areas I would need to investigate and to identify likely sources of useful information.

1.7 Chapter outline

Chapter 2: Methodology

Chapter 2 explains the methodology of the thesis, including the philosophical foundations of qualitative research and the aims of the constructivist approach. It addresses the challenges of combining a chronological narrative with a thematic approach and explains my own dual position as an academic researcher and an ‘insider’ in the study. It discusses the main sources for the research – official documents, contemporary literature and semi-structured interviews – and the methods used for data collection and analysis. The chapter ends with a declaration of my own approach to teaching and learning which inevitably underlies the study and has coloured my judgements about quality assurance.

Chapter 3: Facts and figures

Chapter 3 presents a chronological summary of events and policy developments for the period 1985-2004 and a chart illustrating the four phases of quality assurance identified in the narrative. Secondly, some key statistics including figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) are included, relating to the expansion of universities, student and staff numbers and the total income and expenditure of HEIs between 1994 and 2004, with some figures for 2013-14 added for comparison. The final section gives background information on the definitions and processes of quality assurance and some estimated costs.

Chapter 4: ‘A crisis in higher education’?

Chapter 4 explains the historical background to government concerns about the quality of UK higher education during its transition from an élite to a mass system. It explores the impact of the Conservative political agenda from 1979 till 1997: the pressure on universities to produce graduates to contribute to the economy, the preoccupation with public sector organisations’ accountability to the tax-payer and the emphasis on efficiency and value for money. It outlines the Green Paper of 1985 which signalled the onset of major changes and explains how the desire for government control contributed to a feeling of crisis among academics.

Chapter 5: Legislative reforms, 1987-92

Chapter 5 traces the processes leading to the legislation of 1988 and 1992 and the unsuccessful attempts by the universities to resist threats to their independence. It outlines the major reforms, including the combining of existing universities and polytechnics into one greatly enlarged sector, the creation of the Funding Councils to administer a new financial régime and the introduction of quality assurance as an instrument of regulation. It defines aspects of quality control, audit and assessment and predicts future conflicts in the ensuing struggle for power between the universities and the state.

Chapter 6: The quality industry

Chapter 6 describes how the introduction of quality assurance spawned a whole new ‘industry’ in higher education as the demands of audit and assessment greatly increased the volume of work. It also identifies a number of connections and parallels with the industrial world from the origins of quality assurance in a manufacturing setting to the onus on universities to adopt a corporate style of management and the tendency to view higher education as a ‘product’ available for purchase by students in the market.

Chapter 7: The quality debate, 1992-95

Chapter 7 gives an account of the early stages of the ‘quality debate’ which broke out in higher education over the implementation and impacts of quality assurance. It describes academics’ resentment at the loss of autonomy and sense of professional intrusion caused by external regulation and objections to what they considered as the unsuitable methodology of quality assurance, the additional bureaucratic demands and in particular the unnecessary duplication caused by the overlapping processes of audit and assessment. It then seeks reasons why academics lost the argument despite varied modes of resistance.

Chapter 8: Phases of quality assurance, 1995-2004

Chapter 8 examines three successive phases of quality assurance between 1995 and 2004 which were characterised by a recurring pattern of rising protests culminating in political intervention and subsequent further change. The first records university protests about the scoring system for teaching quality assessment introduced in 1995 and the establishment of a joint planning group by the Secretary of State whose proposals led to the foundation of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in 1997. The second describes how QAA proposals for even more stringent quality assurance arrangements provoked an increasing furore and a surprise decision by David Blunkett that the burden of quality assurance should be significantly reduced, leading to the introduction of a new system of institutional audit by 2002. The final section recounts university complaints to the Prime Minister Tony Blair that chronic underfunding was threatening the quality of higher education and Blair's willingness in 2004 to risk his political future in order to force an unpopular increase in student fees through Parliament as part of the Higher Education Act of 2004.

Chapter 9: Working with quality assurance - effects on staff

Chapter 9 focuses on the variable and often divisive effects of quality assurance on the working lives of front-line academics. It demonstrates how the pressures of increased workload affected their work-life balance and, though some academics rose to the challenge of the 'performativity' culture, others suffered damaging psychological stresses which adversely affected their relationship with students.

Chapter 10: Students in the higher education 'market'

Chapter 10 traces the growing concept of higher education as a market within which fee-paying students were expected to assume the role of 'customers'. It considers the government pressure on universities to provide increasing amounts of information to guide their choice of courses and the growing influence of students as evaluators of the education they were receiving. It analyses the benefits of this 'empowerment' but also the risks of increased complaints and litigation and distortion in the relationship between teachers and learners.

Chapter 11: Discourses of quality assurance

Chapter 11 brings together major recurring themes into a number of 'discourses of quality' in which the many interests involved in quality assurance voiced their diverse points of view. Presenting the findings in this way leads to an understanding that the opposing arguments about quality assurance were elements of an overarching oppositional discourse

between the government's agenda and the traditional aims and values of universities which had serious consequences for UK higher education.

Chapter 12: Weighing up the impacts of quality assurance

Chapter 12 first reports that previous internal and external evaluations of quality assurance had demonstrated both pros and cons and secondly demonstrates that the government's aims for quality assurance had been only partially fulfilled. The specific impacts of quality assurance on universities, on teaching, on staff and on students are drawn together in a 'balance sheet' at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 13: Verdicts on quality assurance

Chapter 13 presents a number of conclusions in answer to the original research questions. The origins of quality assurance were largely politically motivated for a number of reasons and its processes were quickly embedded within higher education causing profound changes which were greatly resisted by many academics. Its impacts were both positive and negative and there was little evidence that it had made a significant difference to the quality of teaching and learning. The final section of the chapter assesses what could have been done differently to make quality assurance more relevant to the promotion of effective learning.

Chapter 14: Epilogue

A brief epilogue summarises trends in quality assurance over the previous decade and expresses concerns about its future in the light of some possibly conflicting reforms proposed by HEFCE and by the UK Government during 2015.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

‘The combination of multiple methodological practices as a strategy adds rigor, complexity, richness and depth to an inquiry’ (Flick, 1998: 231).

2.1 *Philosophical foundations*

2.1.1 Qualitative interpretive research

It was clear to me from the start that this study of quality assurance would come under the broad heading of qualitative research, defined by Creswell (2007: 249) as ‘an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that explores a social or human problem’. In order to achieve ‘a complex detailed understanding of the issue’ (Creswell, 2007: 40), the researcher seeks detailed views directly from informants and takes account of the context in which they operate. A quantitative approach would not be suitable for what I envisaged as a study of a complex web of events taking place over time and involving a multitude of human interactions and relationships which would include investigation of why people behaved as they did in given circumstances.

The growth of qualitative research over the past 20 years means that in selecting an approach to their study, researchers now face ‘an embarrassment of choices’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 18). Many scholars have pointed out the increasing types of study and the lack of consistency in the terminology used to describe them. Examination of a number of qualitative approaches, including five of the most commonly used methodologies associated with qualitative methods of research, as analysed by Creswell (2007)¹, showed that my study did not fit comfortably into these accepted approaches. In order to help explain my research approach, therefore, I turned to Creswell’s identification of a number of characteristics commonly shared by qualitative studies. These include interviews to discover ‘the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem’ (Creswell, 2007: 37). Researchers will then analyse the data inductively to identify patterns and themes from the ‘bottom up’ (Creswell, 2007: 38) rather than imposing pre-conceived theories held by the researcher. In this type of research, the researcher is both the key actor in data collection (e.g. carrying out interviews and analysing commentaries) and the interpreter of it. In Merriam’s words, (2009: 11) the purpose of research is to ‘describe,

¹ Narrative Research; Phenomenology; Grounded Theory; Ethnography; Case Study.

understand, interpret'. In this way, by identifying multiple perspectives, the researcher will be able to create a 'complex description and interpretation of the problem' (Creswell, 2007: 39). This interpretive approach seemed to cover important aspects of the approach I intended to take and I decided to adopt Merriam's simple definition of 'a basic qualitative study' which 'has as its goal understanding how people make sense of their experiences' (Merriam (2009: 23).

2.1.2 Constructivism

An extension of this interpretive approach with its emphasis on multiple perspectives is the underlying assumption that 'reality is socially constructed, that is there is no single, observable reality. Rather there are multiple realities, or interpretations of a single event. Researchers do not find knowledge, they construct it' (Merriam, 2009: 9-10). Or, as Crotty put it, 'meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it... meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting' (Crotty, 1998: 42-43). Such meanings are often formed through interaction with others through a process described as 'social constructivism' (Creswell 2007). A passage by Guba and Lincoln (*Fourth Generation Evaluation*, 1989: 8) related to evaluation research neatly describes this approach which I have taken in my thesis:

'Evaluation outcomes are not descriptions of the 'way things really are' or 'really work', or of some 'true state of affairs, but instead represent meaningful constructions that individual actors or groups of actors form to 'make sense' of the situations in which they find themselves. The findings are not 'facts' in some ultimate sense but are, instead, literally *created* through an interactive process and *includes* the evaluator ... as well as the many stakeholders... What emerges from this process is one or more *constructions* that are the realities of the case.'

As Cohen, Manion and Morrison observed (2007: 141) comparison between multiple perspectives of one phenomenon can help 'to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint'. This provides a kind of 'triangulation' to help the researcher to confirm the validity of the views expressed and to judge how prevalent they might be in a wider context. Creswell (2007: 35) writes of qualitative research as 'an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material' while Richardson (2000) uses the comparison with the different facets of a crystal held up to the light. In a parallel metaphor, I have thought of this constructivist approach as resembling a Cubist painting in which

small sections representing the subject from different angles are combined into a whole. This concurs exactly with what I am trying to do in my study.

2.1.3 The position of the academic researcher

An important epistemological consideration in interpretive research is to work out the relationship between the researcher and the topic being researched. In this kind of study, the process of discovering multiple realities means that ‘researchers try to get as close as possible to the participants being studied’ (Creswell, 2007: 18). In short, researchers become ‘insiders’, whose main aim is to understand the subject ‘from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s’ (Merriam, 2009: 1).

There are a number of possible drawbacks for academics in assuming this role in research, primarily the risk to critical objectivity if ‘the observer is inside the experiment’ (Ball and Eggins, 1989: 2). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007: 19) point out that a researcher adopting this interpretivist stance is ‘rejecting the viewpoint of the detached, objective observer – a mandatory feature of traditional research’. On the other hand, there are definite arguments in favour of ‘an insider’s view’. In the introduction to his comprehensive history of quality assurance in higher education, Brown (2004: 4-5) pointed out that his experience of multiple roles within this narrative gave him a unique understanding of the events. He guarded against a charge of bias by placing his account of the development of quality assurance within the wider context of public regulation and also freely acknowledged instances where he judged that his own presentation of events might be ‘particularly limited, or partial’. Affirming the value of ‘an insider’s account’, he emphasised that ‘just because the author was involved in these events they can be described with a precision, and a flavour, that it may be difficult for outsiders to understand or convey’.

Morley (2003: vii) explained a different motive for involving herself in research on quality assurance: self-preservation. Finding herself compelled as an academic manager to operate within the regulatory frameworks of quality assurance to which she was fundamentally opposed, she found it helpful to make quality assurance ‘an object of inquiry’. By thus converting her negative experiences of quality régimes ‘into data for policy analysis’ she was able to mitigate the strains of having to operate ‘inside and outside the discourse’.

As Merriam (2009: 15) pointed out, in this kind of interpretive study, ‘the researcher is in the powerful position of being the primary instrument for data collection and analysis’ and also the medium for interpretation of the findings. There is therefore always a potential for lack of objectivity through the imposition of the researcher’s own point of view.

Attempting to strike a balance in this dilemma, I concluded that it is sensible for researchers to accept Ahern’s view (1999: 121) that ‘total objectivity is neither achievable nor necessarily desirable in qualitative research’. It is therefore sensible and legitimate for researchers to make use of the advantages of insider access provided that they are fully aware of these risks and make every effort to reduce bias. This conclusion underpinned the way in which I reflected on and managed my own presence in the study.

2.1.4 Where did I come in?

As the background to this study described in chapter 1 made clear, there was no doubt that I was in a sense an ‘insider’. The origins of the study were based on my own experience of being closely involved in the implementation of quality assurance in a university department in the early 1990s. In this respect I fitted the statement by Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 3) that ‘qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world’. This *was* my world in the 1990s and I wanted to know what had happened next. The research questions in the current study continue a quest begun at that time so I was not starting from scratch. Nor was I impartial as I had already become aware of some of the negative reactions to quality assurance within the sector, particularly in the context of open continuing education in which I worked.

Recognising my potential as a data source in the new study, I was interested in an article by Margaret Harris (2001) about the place of self in research which expresses her growing confidence that reflections on her own experiences could enrich her research. I recognised that in addition to my university experience, subsequent work at senior level in public organisations had given me an understanding of the workings of government policy in other sectors during the period in question. While my background in the humanities would not necessarily equip me to enter the field of history and social science, Creswell’s comment (2007: 248) on the qualitative researcher’s role as ‘an interpreter of the data’, and ‘the importance of language and discourse in qualitative research’ encouraged me to reflect on what my own academic training in languages and literature could add to the interpretation of history. I realised that my interest in language would equip me to analyse official documents and help me to tune in to the many conflicting arguments in the quality

debate. Experience in literary analysis might help to identify the many complex relationships revealed in the contemporary literature and understand how individual personalities can influence policy and the train of events. I would also enjoy using quotations from contemporary literature to bring the thesis alive and lend authenticity to the narrative. At the same time, however, I recognised the need to guard against a possible tendency to write about history as ‘lit. crit.’ focusing on story-telling rather than analysis and giving too much weight to the psychology of the main players.

Creswell (2007: 43) emphasised that in interpretive qualitative research, conclusions would be ‘partly based on participants’ perspectives and partly based on our own interpretation, never clearly escaping our own personal stamp on a study. In keeping with Harris’s view (2001: 748) that ‘self is a key element in any piece of social research, irrespective of whether it is explicitly acknowledged’, the impossibility of being totally objective means that researchers must make conscious efforts to put aside their own values, assumptions and personal issues while gathering and analysing their data and reporting their findings. This process known as ‘bracketing’ (Ahern, 1999: 407) calls for a high degree of self-reflection throughout the research process.

Although the decade-long gap following a different career path meant that I was no longer personally connected with the field of quality assurance, it was nevertheless important to introduce some specific safeguards. In analysing the varying definitions of ‘quality’ in relation to higher education at the end of this chapter, I have declared my own educational standpoint and how this dovetails with one particular approach. I also avoided some unequivocal opinions expressed in my previous dissertation and used the third person for reporting. I interviewed key senior individuals with direct personal experience of quality assurance and reported their range of opinions. In parallel, I used contemporary literature as far as possible to provide confirmation or express alternative views as the quality debate developed. In addition I tried to avoid being over-influenced by interviewee opinions and literary sources which confirmed my own views. My previous dual position as an academic teaching in a department where quality assurance was being imposed and as the quality assurance officer with responsibility for implementing it assisted objectivity: I could understand and empathise with a range of perspectives while not espousing any of them. I prioritised historical accuracy, tracing events through documentary evidence to provide a solid chronological framework for the study as the basis for interpretation, while information from many individuals fed into a composite picture in keeping with my chosen constructivist approach. My intention was to understand and present the views of others in

the course of the thesis rather than my own until the end when I attempted to reach some verdicts.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 An eclectic approach

To clarify the differences between ‘method’ and ‘methodology’, I have adopted the following definitions:

‘The term method can be understood to relate principally to the tools of data collection or analysis: techniques such as questionnaires and interviews. Methodology has a more philosophical meaning, and usually refers to the approach or paradigm that underpins the research.’
(Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010: 59).

In designing a study to achieve my interpretive goals within a chronological framework, I recognised a number of challenges: how to produce a factual history of quality assurance in addition to seeking the views of participants about their differing experiences, and then carrying out an inductive analysis of a large amount of data from different sources to reach the desired level of understanding. In short, my study was about the sequence of events, which required a timeline, but also about people, so different approaches would be required to investigate different research questions.

I looked to the example of Kogan and Hanney (2000: 42) in their comprehensive analysis of the relationship between higher education and the state, who chose to adopt a position of ‘eclecticism’ which allowed them to consider other ‘perspectives’ rather than being constrained by a single theoretical framework in their study. I felt that this more eclectic approach to methodology was in keeping with the constructivist framework and would appropriately represent the complexity of the higher education environment which I was endeavouring to analyse. The word ‘bricolage’ has been coined to define the adoption of ‘multiple methodologies’ now becoming more frequent in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998: 3). To enable me to write a factual history and also to represent the views of participants I felt there were advantages to my study being informed by a number of varied approaches.

2.2.2 Handling history: a chronological framework

2.2.2.1 *What happened when?*

I was well aware of the task I was undertaking in attempting to trace the history of quality assurance, particularly as it meant venturing into the complex area of higher education during a very turbulent period. As Ball and Eggins eloquently warned:

‘The pattern of events is difficult to discern. Historians compete to construct plausible accounts of the past. The present is too close to us to be seen clearly. The future is unknown, and largely unknowable. If mere description is difficult, explanation is even more so. And this is especially true in the realm of education in the United Kingdom, where there is no easy consensus about its purpose, nature and value’. (Ball and Eggins, 1989:1.)

Writing about politics was another risky area: despite the availability of parliamentary archives, political memoirs and press coverage, much of the material was too superficial and partisan to provide a basis for a balanced view (Jenkins, 1995). And quality assurance itself was an elusive topic to pursue. Nevertheless it was essential for this study to be able to answer the question ‘what happened when?’. The early part of my work was therefore devoted to examining historical accounts of the successive governments from the 1980s into the 21st century and extensive investigation of documentary sources of that period. This enabled me to establish a timeline for the 20 years from 1985-2005 and to start building an understanding of the complex structures of government and higher education institutions, the many ‘stakeholders’ involved and the relationships between them. For ease of reference by the reader I constructed a chart incorporating dates, events, policy developments and individuals which appears as Table 3.1, thus strengthening the chronological framework of the thesis. I later found that Malcolm Tight (2009) had adopted a similar approach by setting out detailed factual information in a number of tables to underpin his history of the development of higher education in the UK since 1945.

In due course, I had to determine an endpoint. Investigation of the origins of quality assurance in the mid-80s was essential to my study and it soon became apparent that I could not cover the period from then up to the present within the limits of a PhD thesis. I therefore decided to use key legislation to set the determining dates, starting with the Conservative Green Paper of 1985 and ending with the Labour Government’s White Paper of 2003 and subsequent Higher Education Act of 2004. In some ways this arbitrary cut-off point was unsatisfactory but these 20 years did cover the major developments in the history

of quality assurance and the period since then has been less subject to reform. As a way of bringing the study up to date I have added a short epilogue which briefly details the main changes in quality assurance during the past decade.

2.2.2.2 *Fact or fiction?*

A potential problem in writing history within an interpretive framework of this kind is that ‘interpretation’ may stray beyond the boundaries of reporting into fiction. Awareness that ‘historiography’ is defined by *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary*, 1983, as ‘the *art* or employment of writing history’ alerted me to the need to ground this study as far as possible in fact (the chronological framework) and produce evidence to support claims being made. I have found myself using the words ‘narrative’ or even ‘story’ or ‘drama’ to describe this account of the complex and turbulent sequence of events in the history of quality assurance. While a ‘narrative’ can be any ‘prosaic discourse’ (as distinct from poetry), ‘in a story, events and actions are drawn together into an organized whole by means of a plot’ (Polkinghorne, 1995: 7). The idea of a ‘plot’ implies causal linking of a series of events leading to a dénouement and one problem with writing recent history is that the end is not known. There is a risk that presenting history in this way, particularly incorporating original quotations verbatim, may result in story-telling rather than analysis. This caveat also applies to the metaphorical presentation of the events surrounding quality assurance as a ‘drama’ which could lead to over-emphasis on the psychology of the main ‘players’. Imaginative presentation of interpretive research can produce interesting insights, but as a quotation from Walter Benjamin warns in the opening line of Rachel Lichtensteins’s *On Brick Lane* (2008: 1) ‘the Past being over and done with now falls prey to our invention’.

2.2.2.3 *A composite picture*

Identification of the very complex structures and relationships involved in higher education during the period under investigation made me realise that answers to my research questions could only be discovered (if at all) through trying to understand the many different and often conflicting views and interests of the individuals and groups affected by quality assurance. Accessing their opinions about the different phases of quality assurance through contemporary literature and interviewing ten influential individuals with different roles in the narrative allowed me to construct a picture of what was happening in the many

different scenarios where quality assurance was being introduced and thus to gain an overall understanding of its origins and impact.

Despite the above caveats, therefore, gathering these perceptions to enrich this study has enabled me to surmount a further hurdle of historical research, ‘the inevitable problem of understanding the text within the belief system of the time – the attempt to enter imaginatively into the mindset of people and institutions in a very different era and situation’ (Pring 2000: 43). This presentation of multiple perspectives is appropriate for the complexity of quality assurance, as attested by Barnett (1992: 5) who pointed out the multiplicity of attitudes to quality which were becoming apparent: the state promoting performance indicators to assess quality; the academic world favouring traditional methods of peer-review; and a market-led system generating consumer-oriented approaches. In this way, he detected ‘less a debate about quality, therefore, than a babel of voices, their different messages reflecting alternative starting points and conceptions of higher education itself’.

An interesting endorsement of the technique of combining factual investigation and participants’ commentary appears in a review of *Diamond Street* (2012) by Rachel Lichtenstein which successfully introduces interview material to inform and enliven rigorous historical research:

‘Lichtenstein’s methodology is to alternate contemporary oral history of the street through a series of interviews with its present and past workers, with her own dogged investigations into the archives, maps, charts and underground caverns of the sewer systems.’

(Linda Grant, *The Times Saturday Review*, 19 May 2012.)

2.3 *Research methods*

2.3.1 Research plan

This section explains how the methodology described in the previous section has in turn informed a range of methods of data collection and analysis. As a way of clarifying my thinking, I drew up the following plan showing the main areas I would need to investigate in order to answer the research questions and what data sources would be likely to provide the necessary information. The plan makes clear that, in keeping with Punch's classification, my thesis would be both a '*descriptive*' and an '*explanatory*' study, in other words aiming to answer questions about what happened, but also about 'why' and 'how', (Punch, 2006: 35).

Table 2.1: Research Plan

Research questions	Aspect to investigate	Data sources
<i>What happened when?</i>	HISTORY <u>Aim:</u> Establish a chronological framework for the study	<u>Official documents:</u> White Papers; Legislation <u>Reports from archives</u> Hansard; Funding Councils; HEQC QAA; CVCP etc. <u>Literature:</u> Press coverage; historical accounts policy studies <u>Interviews:</u> Information about phasing of QA
<i>How far was the introduction of QA linked to government policy?</i>	POLICY <u>Aim:</u> Understand the government's motivation for introducing HE reforms and how they were modified over time	<u>Legislative process:</u> White papers; Acts of Parliament <u>Guidance and consultation:</u> Funding Councils and universities <u>Public dialogue:</u> Speeches; Correspondence; Minutes <u>Literature:</u> Contemporary accounts Retrospective studies of HE policy <u>Interviews:</u> questions 1 and 2
<i>How appropriate was QA as an instrument for assessing quality in education? How did the HE sector react?</i>	QA THEORY and PRACTICE <u>Aim:</u> Trace the successive phases of QA. Investigate its 'results' and the reactions of academics	<u>Official documents:</u> Government statements of purposes of QA; guidance from agencies to HE sector; results of consultation with HE sector; <u>Literature:</u> Studies of development of PIs to measure quality; HEQC material on QA in practice; Contemporary arguments in the 'quality debate'; <u>Interviews:</u> questions 3 and 4
<i>What changes took place as a result of the implementation of QA?</i>	IMPACTS OF QA <u>Aim:</u> Identify the specific impacts and overall benefits and disadvantages that resulted from the implementation of QA	<u>Evaluations of QA:</u> Internal and external <u>Literature:</u> Ongoing debates about successive phases of QA Commentaries on specific issues (e.g. impacts on students and staff) <u>Interviews:</u> questions 5, 6, 7 and 8

2.3.2 Data collection

2.3.2.1 *Official documents*

Official contemporary documents are an essential primary source in a historical study such as this to establish chronology and provide knowledge of policy and legislation. The political significance of quality assurance meant that there was no shortage of this material so ‘mining data from documents’ (Merriam, 2009: 139) became a key research activity. This study has relied on detailed study of White Papers and legislation from 1985-2004 to provide a chronological framework for the thesis.

The majority of the official documents I used were available on-line, including all White Papers, Acts of Parliament and Hansard records, as well as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Quality Assurance (QAA) archives and a wealth of material relating to quality assurance in universities. Material produced by the HEQC until its demise in 1997 remains in hard copy in the University of Glasgow Library. I also sought statistical information from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) about staff and student numbers and funding to inform the context.

Useful documentary material from other sources, e.g. archives of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), appeared in books on the history of higher education policy, e.g. Pollitt (1993), Kogan and Hanney (2000), Tight (2009), Shattock (2012) and in Roger Brown’s detailed history of UK quality assurance (2004). Reference to this data gleaned from the literature is made with acknowledgement.

To provide easy access to these documents I copied and filed them in date order according to origin (e.g. legislation; HEFCE; QAA etc.). Selected statistics as well as extracts from a number of key policy documents about quality assurance are included in chapter 3 for ease of reference.

2.3.2.2 *Literature*

A vivid phrase quoted by Merriam (2009: 150) refers to a reader standing among the library shelves ‘metaphorically surrounded by voices begging to be heard’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This conveys the feeling of a researcher embarking on a new project and

faced with a bewildering multiplicity of sources. However, I was not setting out on an entirely new path at the start of this study: my starting point was my previous knowledge of the literature of the late 1980s and early 1990s which had fed into my earlier dissertation. Because I was pursuing questions and ideas raised in previous research, I did not need to undertake a full-scale literature search in order to familiarise myself with the topic. Instead, I reacquainted myself with material that had fed into my earlier thinking and pursued directions that led on from there.

One aspect of the ‘quality industry’ during the 1990s described in chapter 6 had been the growing interest by academics in researching different aspects of teaching quality and quality assurance in higher education, as evidenced by the series of books published by the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) and the Open University Press from the 1980s onwards. Though acknowledging that the level of interest in quality assurance may have peaked now that it is thoroughly embedded within university systems, Tight (2012: 104) still includes research into the theory or practice of ‘quality’ as one of the eight key themes for his study of current research into higher education. There was plenty of literature for me to explore. Further evidence of continuing academic interest in the topic were the two journals, *Quality Assurance in Education*, founded in 1993, and *Quality in Higher Education*, founded in 1995 as a ‘vehicle’ for research into higher education both in the UK and internationally (Harvey, 1995: 5). Looking back twenty years later, he wrote in an editorial that the journal has provided a forum ‘for discussion of quality as it happened’ (*Quality in Higher Education*, (2010: 4). The first issue of this journal also produced a helpful annotated bibliography of publications related to quality.

In investigating the early background to quality assurance, I benefited from a rich seam of literature by authors such as Reeves (1988), Becher (1989), Halsey (1992) and Russell (1993) who described the growing unease during the 1980s as the cold wind of impending change threatened the academic world. The early literature on quality assurance was largely pre-occupied with definitions of quality, and debates about the appropriateness of quality assurance as a way of regulating higher education. Many academics voiced protests against the methodology, bureaucratic overload and costs (Griffith, 1989, Trow, 1994, Alderman, 1996). Constant changes in the systems and practices of quality assurance meant that the topic remained controversial and much of the literature, fomented by the press, generated more heat than light. Initially research tended to focus on policy and top level relationships between government, quality assurance agencies and the universities rather than the grassroots experience of academics (Kogan and Hanney, 2000, Brown,

2004). By the early 2000s, however, researchers were beginning to identify its impacts, positive and negative, on the quality of teaching and on staff and students (Henkel, 2000, Trowler, 2002, Ball, 2003, Morley, 2003).

Quality assurance also featured in more general literature about higher education policy, the development of universities and the quality of teaching, and was cited as an example of the increasing political demands for accountability throughout the public sector (Pollitt, 1993, Power, 1994 and 1997, Shattock, 2012). In addition it featured in accounts of the changing role of students within the higher education market (J. Williams, 2013). Political histories, biographies and autobiographies also shed light on the events of the time (Jenkins, 1995, Campbell, 2003, Thatcher, 1993, and Blair, 1993) and I used contemporary press reports, particularly the *Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)*², to give a sense of immediacy to the narrative.

Sources in all these categories contributed to my research, whether as single articles on a specific topic or as more substantive studies. Many researchers active in the field of quality assurance over a prolonged period became constant sources of reference, almost assuming the identity of old friends. For practical purposes I initially stored notes and copies from the literature alphabetically by author and then moved the material into folders chapter by chapter as the major themes emerged and the thesis took shape.

2.3.2.3 Semi-structured interviews

The third source of information essential to my study was a series of ten semi-structured interviews with key individuals who had lived through the period in question and were able to report on their experience in their own words. This approach was intended to allow me to build up a composite picture of what happened in different scenarios where quality assurance was being introduced and thus to gain an overall understanding of its origins and impact. Drever (1995: 13) highlighted the characteristics of semi-structured interviews that appeared to suit my purpose: the questions are set by the interviewer who has flexibility to adapt them according to the circumstances, and there is the option to use ‘prompts’ and ‘probes’ to expand the scope or explore the answers in depth. In turn, the interviewee has freedom to concentrate on certain questions and to dictate the length and range of the answers. Becher (1989: 174) likened semi-structured interviews to ‘a detective

² Re-named as *Times Higher Education* in 2008.

investigation' which needed to be long enough to establish a strong enough 'degree of rapport' and trust to allow discussion of complex and sensitive issues. In the light of a distinction made by Maxwell (1996) and referred to by Punch (2006) I realised that while my research questions had identified the broad issues I wanted to understand, the interview questions should be focused at a more specific level as part of the process of collecting the data required to contribute to that understanding.

2.3.2.4 A 'purposeful' sample

Having formulated my questions I approached a number of individuals who had occupied senior positions in academia, politics, the civil service and the quality assurance agencies and who would be qualified to give the kind of in-depth answers I was seeking. Ten individuals accepted my invitation, thus becoming a 'purposeful sample' (Creswell, 2007: 125). All of them had operated at a senior level, many in a number of organisations in both England and Scotland during the period of my study. Though they had retired from these positions, most had retained some connections with the world of higher education and/or quality assurance. Their range of experience is summarised in Table 2.2. They had all occupied more than one role during their careers so the totals add up to more than ten. They had held positions in either teaching or management (or both) in a total of 12 universities, 8 in England and 4 in Scotland. Of these, 6 were pre-92 and 6 were post-92 institutions. Among the teachers, 4 were professors, whose subjects included higher education policy and teaching and learning. In addition, they had a remarkable range of experience of quality assurance, either as implementers or on the receiving end in the universities and several had written or lectured widely on the subject. One notable point illustrated by this group of interviewees was that despite the great complexity of the higher education sector individuals involved in quality assurance in fact inhabited quite a small world, often moving from one section of the 'industry' to another, either as their own careers developed or as structures and organisations in the sector changed.

Five of the interviewees had been personally known to me at some time in the past. Of the ten, only one was female which might be viewed unfavourably by modern standards of gender balance. The explanation is that at the time in question, the number of women in the kind of positions whose views I was keen to explore was extremely small. A corresponding imbalance is apparent in the list of 90 eminent interviewees who participated in a major study of higher education policy (Kogan and Hanney, 2000) among whom only 5 were women.

Table 2.2: Interviewees' experience

Academics	7	England and Scotland
Professors	4	Subjects including HE policy, teaching and learning
Heads of universities	7	4 pre-92; 3 post-92
University administrators	3	
University court lay members	2	
Funding Councils (HEFCE and SHEFC)	2	CE; Chair; Assessment Committee Chair
HEQC	3	CE; Senior Managers
QAA	2	CE; Scottish Director
Senior civil servants	2	
Industrialist	1	CE
Politician	1	HE Minister
FE sector	1	CE

2.3.2.5 Pilot interview

In preparation for this exercise I undertook a pilot semi-structured interview lasting about an hour with an academic at Glasgow University to test whether the questions I had drafted were clear and would elicit his views on the topics I wished to investigate. The main emphasis was on his memories of the introduction of quality assurance and the impacts he thought it had had on the quality of teaching. While the questions served adequately as the basis for an interview, I learnt that they were too narrowly focused to take in some areas on which I hoped he would comment, particularly the political origins of quality assurance. I therefore increased both the number and scope of the questions to make it much clearer to the interviewee which areas I was hoping to explore. I also learned that in places I had talked too much so the conversation became more like a discussion than an interview. This was a useful lesson in preparation for the main series of interviews.

2.3.2.6 The interviews

The initial approach to the interviewees consisted of a letter of invitation (see Appendix 1) personalised to reflect their particular experience, explaining the purpose of my study and inviting their participation in semi-structured interviews which would give them some control over the scope and content. I carried out nine face-to-face interviews and one by telephone between January and December 2011 in settings chosen by the interviewees. Apart from the shorter telephone interview, they varied in length between one and two-and-a-half hours. A statement explaining the purpose and scope of the interview and seeking permission for digital recording was sent in advance to each interviewee. Section 2.6 below explains the issues of consent, anonymity and attribution which were further clarified at the start of each interview through the signing of a consent form.

The interviews were based around a series of 8 open-ended questions developed from issues that had arisen in my original investigation of the topic and refined in the light of further reading. (See Appendix 2). The interview schedules contained a number of prompts in case answers were not forthcoming but in the event they were rarely needed. Though I had not sent the questions in advance in case this might inhibit spontaneity, several of the interviewees had anticipated topics they thought important to address. I encouraged them to talk about different aspects in which they had been personally involved and their answers provided a great deal of very rich data. Different interviewees were more or less interested in different questions according to their own experience and they were free to steer the interviews in different directions.

I reviewed the appropriateness of the questions after each interview to check whether amendment might be needed but because of their open nature they all proved fit for purpose and remained unchanged. I opted to do the transcriptions myself: though laborious, this process gave me in-depth familiarity with the content which contributed to my own critical reflection and proved invaluable for the analysis. The transcripts were augmented by brief handwritten notes taken during the interviews on issues that had strayed beyond the scope of the questions. The interviewees' words appear in italics in the thesis to differentiate them from the main text. All interviewees are referred to in the text by a number, for example (I: 1), and those who have given consent to be named or given a professional designation are identified as appropriate.

2.3.2.7 Informal contacts and discussions

Throughout the period of my research there were many opportunities for informal discussion with a large number of people involved with quality assurance at various times and in various capacities who expressed an interest in my research and were willing to share their experiences. A meeting with members of the Student Representative Council in Glasgow University who were officially involved in quality assurance processes was particularly valuable. I also benefited greatly from attendance at classes and departmental research seminars where the opportunity to discuss my research with colleagues invariably yielded valuable insights. Attendance at conferences and seminars given by visiting speakers was another source of useful information.

2.4 Research methods: data analysis

The data analysis was an ongoing process which took place simultaneously with data collection. It included identifying emerging themes, comparing different accounts to recognise common or conflicting points and subjecting the ideas to my own critical reflection to develop my thinking.

2.4.1 Document analysis

Documentary sources provided historical background and informed the chronological narrative, but they also provided many other kinds of insights. As Crotty (1998: 91) observed when discussing the interpretation of documents,

‘Hermeneutics obviously grounds the meaning of texts in more than their sheerly semantic significance. Account tends to be taken, for example, of features such as the intentions and histories of authors, the relationship between author and interpreter or the particular relevance for texts for readers.’

I regularly found it useful to start with or revert to official documents as a basis for understanding particular issues such as the intended purposes of legislation, changes in policy and the aims of a particular piece of guidance. Hansard records gave blow by blow accounts of arguments in the quality debate; guidance circulars, consultation documents and reports from the Funding Councils, the HEQC and the QAA revealed the intentions behind quality assurance and its changes over time; university guidance and pro formas illustrated the systems in action; quality audit and assessment reports exemplified its outputs; and internal and external evaluations identified its impacts.

A wide range of archival material from different organisations offered insights on motivations, reactions and relationships while verbatim reports of speeches and correspondence revealed the authentic flavour of the quality debates. In addition, press coverage recorded the many controversies provoked by quality assurance. This use of contemporary documents lends a particular dimension to this kind of study since they are ‘a product of the context in which they were produced and therefore grounded in the real world’ (Merriam, 2009: 156).

2.4.2 Use of literature

My use of the literature contributed to the study in various ways. Because contemporary commentators provided an important ongoing commentary on the implementation and impacts of quality assurance, I decided, like Drennan (2000), to integrate their ideas and arguments at appropriate points throughout the thesis rather than focusing on them in a separate literature review. I have tried to refer as far as possible to contemporary literature when describing particular stages in the chronological narrative to give the feeling of how thinking developed.

I have used quotations extensively to give a sense of history and authenticity to the narrative and illustrate varied perspectives. The device of intermingling verbatim material from the interviews with quotations from contemporary authors allowed the many players who took part in these events to express their different perspectives in their own words.

2.4.3 Interview data: coding and themes

As expected, the interviewees' interpretations of the 'facts' were a combination of their individual memories of events and reflections over time. My previous thinking and the process of transcription had enabled me to start identifying emerging themes. I then coded the large amount of interview data using NVivo software to facilitate sorting and subdividing it under a number of headings. As a result of this process, nine major themes emerged which then became headings under which I listed a large number of sub-themes and lesser categories. The resulting 'coding tree' appears as Appendix 3. The information included factual material about events, organisations and individuals, discussion of issues arising from the interview topics and personal views contributed by individual interviewees, all of which contributed valuable dimensions to the narrative. The next stage was a process of synthesis, identifying patterns and deciding how these could be related back to the original research questions. In this way, the major themes for further analysis were identified and the thesis began to take shape.

I compiled a matrix of 'headline' answers to the interview questions which enabled high level comparison of the individuals' views. Colour-coding of related comments allowed some identification of prevailing opinions though the small sample size and varied experiences of the interviewees rarely produced unanimity, which was of course the expected outcome of an approach underpinned by a constructivist framework. On the other

hand with most of the questions there was a degree of agreement among at least some of the interviewees which enabled comparison and triangulation. It was also important to capture points that might be surprising: indeed some of the most interesting insights were the views of single individuals rather than those that were shared among interviewees.

The recorded interview material enriched the study in a number of ways. Interviewees' memories of dates helped to distinguish the different phases of quality assurance while the accounts of their lived experience lent colour to the narrative. They could often explain why and how things happened and contributed to understanding of conflicts and tensions. Sometimes they could provide information about personalities on the quality assurance scene and they offered their own verdicts on its impacts based on long experience. It is important to make clear that these verbatim quotations are expressions of the interviewees' own opinions and should be interpreted as such rather than as indicators of my views as researcher.

2.5 A flexible structure

A characteristic of qualitative research is unpredictability and the impossibility of following a pre-determined plan (Creswell, 2007, Merriam, 2009). This means that the research design needs to be 'emergent and flexible' (Merriam (2009: 16) and subject to change if necessary. Research on quality assurance with the many vacillations in government policy, uncertainty of definitions, paradoxes and unintended consequences which became apparent during this study, aptly fitted this category. The chronological framework provided the underlying structure in relating the sequence of events. However, the thesis did not follow a pre-determined plan but developed organically with different themes becoming prominent as the research progressed. The individual chapters were planned in detail through an iterative process comparing and combining separate pieces of information from multiple sources to create the desired 'composite picture'.

In the preface to the first edition of *Academic Tribes and Territories* (1989) Becher described a similar process as he adapted the original plan of his book in the light of data collected. He discovered that data previously gathered at first hand from his interviews with academics was not sufficient to give due weight to 'recurrent and apparently significant themes' which had subsequently emerged (Becher, 1989: x). He therefore had to turn to other written sources to do justice to his arguments which resulted in the use of predominantly interview material in certain chapters and relevant research literature in

others. This explanation reflects the process I adopted in my study and explains the resulting shifts in balance between interview material and literary sources in different chapters.

One challenge as the project grew was deciding what to leave out, which led to a significant decision that it would not be possible to give full coverage to the history of quality assurance in Scotland. Comments on the early stages when events in Scotland paralleled those in the rest of the UK are included in the narrative, but brief notes on the different course followed after 2002 when Scotland introduced a different process of external review are included in Appendix 4. Similarly, the parallel developments of quality assurance in other parts of the world are only mentioned in passing.

2.6 *Ethical considerations*

This research project was granted ethical approval by the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences and was carried out in accordance with the university's regulatory ethics procedure. I carried out the research independently and no funding was received from any other sources.

Considerations mainly related to issues of consent, anonymity and attribution. It was emphasised that the interviewees' participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any time. They had the option of remaining anonymous in the study or being named or identified by a professional title. The transcripts were sent to the interviewees for accuracy checking and at this stage each interviewee was asked to identify any parts of the transcript that must be removed, which parts (including direct quotations) could be retained anonymously and which parts (including direct quotations) could be retained and attributed if the interviewee chose to be named. Because of their seniority and status I was not anxious that there was a power imbalance between them and myself as researcher, provided that I honoured these commitments. On the other hand, I felt it necessary to explain to them that because of their high profile in the sector it was not realistic to guarantee that they would not be identified by readers.

2.7 *Defining quality*

Before embarking on a history of quality assurance it was necessary to adopt a definition of 'quality' and consider how it might be applied in the context of higher education. From

my prior research I understood that this was a fraught topic which preoccupied the sector throughout the 1990s and caused much of the strife surrounding the introduction and operation of quality assurance. Clearly there was no uniformly accepted definition so rather than repeat these debates I decided to adopt the fivefold categorisation of quality formulated by Harvey and Green (1993) and further developed by Harvey and Knight (1996). This framework, reproduced below, illustrates the widely differing concepts of quality held by the many stakeholders in higher education and helps to explain some of the consequent conflicts which feature in this narrative.

Table 2.3 Approaches to quality (Harvey and Knight, 1996: 2)

1	Quality as exceptional Traditional notion of quality Excellence (exceeding high standards) Checking standards
2	Quality as perfection or consistency Zero defects Quality culture
3	Quality as fitness for purpose Fitness for purpose 1 – customer specification Meeting requirements Fitness for purpose 2 – mission Quality assurance Customer satisfaction
4	Quality as value for money Performance indicators Customer charters
5	Quality as transformation Enhancing the participant Value added Empowering the participant

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Harvey and Knight (1996) explained these concepts as follows. As applied to higher education, ‘exceptional’ quality implies something excellent, exclusive and attaining very high standards, by definition élitist, where able students achieve excellent results when supported by generous resources. The concept of quality as ‘perfection or consistency’ is borrowed from manufacturing processes where high quality products conform to a prescribed specification and are judged by the absence of defects. This does not sit easily with the idea of learning as an open-ended process. Quality as ‘fitness for purpose’ again

entails conforming to specification but in this case resembles a consumerist relationship where providers attempt to satisfy the demands of ‘customers’, defined in higher education as ‘students, employers, government, society’ (Harvey and Knight, 1996: 6). Equating quality with ‘value for money’ applied the Conservative government’s demands for efficiency and economy to higher education by introducing targets and performance indicators and requiring universities to manage expansion in student numbers with no matching increase in funding, while yet avoiding a decline in quality. Quality as ‘transformation’ contrasts with the previous approaches by focusing on a process designed to enhance and empower student participants, encouraging them to evaluate the education they are receiving, giving them more control over their own education through an ‘active process’ of teaching and learning (Harvey and Knight, 1996: 9).

Drennan (2000) pointed out that a range of approaches to quality could co-exist in a single institution including some imported from industrial settings such as Total Quality Management (TQM). This led to the pursuit of often conflicting aims and different methods of measuring performance. Prioritising accountability over improvement encouraged bureaucratic quality monitoring processes and a lack of motivation to develop performance measures appropriate for student learning (Harvey and Knight, 1996: 83). The Teaching Quality Assessment systems (TQA) introduced from 1995 onwards led to numerical scoring and ranking which were greatly resisted by academics. The resulting complexity of motivations and relationships poses challenges for the researcher. As Barnett (1992: 3) had found in an early analysis, ‘the tension between trying to give a general account of quality in higher education and accepting that there are many definitions of quality will run throughout this book’. In the same way, fundamental questions arise throughout the present study about the appropriateness or otherwise of these varying concepts in relation to higher education.

2.8 *A personal perspective*

It is important at the start of this study to declare that my adult education background and experience of introducing quality assurance systems into a continuing education department gave me a personal perspective on my research topic. While the department acknowledged the need for ‘robust systems of course approval, external examination, course monitoring and review’, I was also aware of ‘concerns that some of the traditionally held values of the adult education approach might be threatened by rigid assessment frameworks and the limitations of over-prescriptive learning outcomes’ (Kuenssberg and

Turner, 1999: 120). In thinking about criteria for quality assessment, therefore, members of the department hoped to protect features that characterised the kind of 'quality as transformation' defined by Harvey and Knight in order to achieve the 'enhancement of the student experience, empowering students as life-long learners' (Harvey and Knight, 1996:100) which has always been a fundamental purpose of adult learning. Sympathy with this approach will inevitably colour my judgements at the end of the thesis.

CHAPTER 3: FACTS AND FIGURES

3.1 *Introduction*

The statistical and factual material in this chapter provides background information in the following categories:

- A chronological summary of events and policy developments for the period 1985-2004 and an outline of the history of quality assurance during the four main phases covered by this study. These provide an essential structural outline for the narrative.
- Higher education statistics showing the expansion of UK universities between 1963 and 2004, the growth in student and staff numbers and the total income and expenditure of HEIs. The graph in Figure 1 compares the rise in student numbers with the decline in funding per student.
- Important background information about the definitions, processes and costs of quality assurance itself which will be referred to during the study.

Rather than consigning this factual information to an Appendix at the end, I decided to present it early on in my narrative to give readers an overview of the historical context and operational details of quality assurance to enhance their understanding as the events unfold. To remind them of where to locate the detail, the tables shown in this chapter are referred to at appropriate points in the text.

3.2 Chronology

Table 3.1: Summary of events and policy developments

DATES	Ministers	Legislation/Events	Organisations	Reports	Policy effects
1979-90	Margaret Thatcher (PM)				Radical changes to higher education in keeping with other public sector reforms
1979-81	Mark Carlisle (DES)				
1980	Geoffrey Howe (Chancellor of the Exchequer)	Expenditure White Paper	UGC imposed a reduction in student numbers to protect the unit of resource.		Severe cuts in university sector funding – number of student places reduced
1981-86	Keith Joseph				
1983			CVCP Academic Standards Group set up	Reynolds Reports (86-89): <i>Academic Standards in Universities</i>	Codes of Practice and self-monitoring
1985			CVCP Committee reviewing university management	<i>Jarratt Report: Efficiency Studies in Universities</i>	Changes to university management aiming for increased efficiency
1985		Green Paper: <i>The development of HE into the 1990s</i>			Promoting expansion of HE after 1981 cuts while attempting to address costs
1986-89	Kenneth Baker				
1985/86		First Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)	Conducted by UGC (next 2 RAEs conducted by UFC)		Purpose to determine allocation of research funding to universities according to 'quality ratings'
1987		White Paper: <i>Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge</i>			Fullest HE review since Robbins. Government priority to reform HE to meet UK's economic needs. Proposals > 1988 Education Act.
1988		EDUCATION REFORM ACT	UGC abolished. UFC and PCFC set up		Removed security of tenure for academics. Polys freed from LEA control.

DATES	Ministers	Legislation/Events	Organisations	Reports	Policy effects
1989			CVCP Academic Audit Unit set up, 1 st Director: Peter Williams		To scrutinise quality control systems in universities
1989-90	<i>John MacGregor</i>				
1990-97	John Major PM				Major structural reforms in 1992 HE Reform Act. Binary line abolished. Funding Councils set up.
1990-92	<i>Kenneth Clarke</i>				
1990		Education (Student Loans) Act	Student Loans Co plc set up to provide loans to cover maintenance for students		Starting to move burden of higher education costs on to students
1991		White Paper: <i>Higher Education: A New Framework</i>			Moving on from <i>Meeting the Challenge</i> . Aim for 30% of age group to attend university by 2000. Announced many reforms of 1992 act. Aiming for 'cost effective expansion' via greater economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
1992		FURTHER & HIGHER EDUCATION ACT	CNAA wound up. HEFCs + FEFC set up (replacing UFC and PCFC). Each Funding Council to have Quality Ass't Unit.		Major structural reforms abolishing 'binary line' between universities and polytechnics. Funding Councils set up. Quality assurance introduced.
1992			HEQC incorporated to continue role of Academic Audit Unit. Chair: John Stoddart, CE: Dr Malcolm Frazer, (1992- 93) Roger Brown, 1993-97		Continued audit of university quality assurance systems in new combined HE sector
1992-94	<i>John Patten (DfE)</i>				

DATES	Ministers	Legislation/Events	Organisations	Reports	Policy effects
1993		<i>White Paper: Realising Our Potential</i>			Re government investment in science and technology. Stressed accountability to the tax payer via monitoring and assessment
1994-97	<i>Gillian Shephard (DfE then DfEE)</i>				Combined functions of HE quality audit and assessment
1995			Joint Planning Group set up by CVCP and HEFCE. Chair: Sir William Kerr Fraser	Reported December 1996	Recommended new Quality Assurance Agency arrangements bringing together audit and assessment
1996		National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education set up	Chaired by Lord Dearing		
1997			HEQC abolished. CE Roger Brown made redundant. New QAA incorporated		
1997	Tony Blair PM				Emphasised priority on 'Education, education and education'
1997-2001	<i>David Blunkett (DfEE)</i>				Desire for 'lighter touch' in QA
1997			Report from National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education	The Dearing Report: <i>Higher Education in the Learning Society</i>	Recommending expansion of HE with increased funding. Students to bear part of cost of HE. Teaching to become more professional. Nat. Institute for Learning and Teaching to be set up. QA to be simplified. Objectives and outcomes of HE to be made clearer to students and employers
1997			Quality Assurance Agency took over functions of HEQC and HEFCE. CE: John Randall		Reform of QA systems and change of culture at the QAA

DATES	Ministers	Legislation/Events	Organisations	Reports	Policy effects
1998		TEACHING & HIGHER EDUCATION ACT			Scheme for student fees of £1,000 per year introduced in universities throughout the UK
2000			Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education founded.		
2000			CVCP renamed Universities UK		
2001	Blunkett's intervention in QAA affairs		Changes unacceptable to John Randall who resigned. Succeeded by Peter Williams in 2002		Further changes at QAA and new procedures introduced.
2001-02	<i>Estelle Morris (DfES)</i>				
2002			Cooke Committee report on the information to be made available by all universities		Part of the Government's increasing emphasis on information which was becoming an element of the quality assurance requirements
2002-04	Charles Clarke				Introduced Labour's higher education legislation
2003		White Paper: <i>The Future of Higher Education</i>			Acknowledging need to increase funding of HE. Continuing aim towards 50% of 18-30 year-olds in HE. More funding for research and for excellence in teaching. Plan for new national body to promote teaching quality. NUS to produce 'guide to HE'

DATES	Ministers	Legislation/Events	Organisations	Reports	Policy effects
2004			Higher Education Academy founded.		Aim to raise quality of university teaching by defining standards and accrediting training
2004		HIGHER EDUCATION ACT			HE funds raised. Student fees increased to £3,000 p.a. with deferred payment. National Student Survey to operate from 2005.

Table 3.2: Phases of quality assurance

1992-1995	<p>Phase 1:</p> <p>Formation of combined HE sector.</p> <p>Quality assurance introduced in legislation as an instrument for regulation.</p> <p>Dual process of audit and subject assessment.</p> <p>3 grades of assessment: excellent, satisfactory, unsatisfactory.</p>
1995-1997	<p>Phase 2:</p> <p>New quality assessment process introduced to include numerical scoring.</p> <p>6 aspects assessed on a 4-point scale with maximum score of 24.</p> <p>Introduction of league tables by the press increasing competition.</p> <p>Continued resistance to 'double whammy'.</p> <p>1996 Joint Planning Group recommending single system.</p>
1997-2001	<p>Phase 3:</p> <p>1997 HEQC abolished and QAA set up.</p> <p>Subject assessment and scoring system continued.</p> <p>Stricter ethos under John Randall and new system proposed.</p> <p>Academic resistance led to Blunkett proposals for a 'lighter touch'.</p> <p>1998 student fees introduced.</p>
2002-2004	<p>Phase 4:</p> <p>Further reforms. Institutional Audit introduced by QAA.</p> <p>Rise of higher education as a 'market' viewing students as 'customers'.</p> <p>2003 White Paper emphasising information as a key aspect of quality assurance.</p> <p>Focus on support for teaching – Higher Education Academy created.</p> <p>2004 Education Act. HE budget increased along with variable tuition fees.</p> <p>Increased information requirements.</p> <p>2005 National Student Survey introduced.</p>

3.3 Higher education statistics

Table 3.3: Expansion of UK Universities 1963-2004, (Tight, 2009: 52-53)

1963	32
1969	47
1991	48
1992	86
1994	90
2004	90

Note:

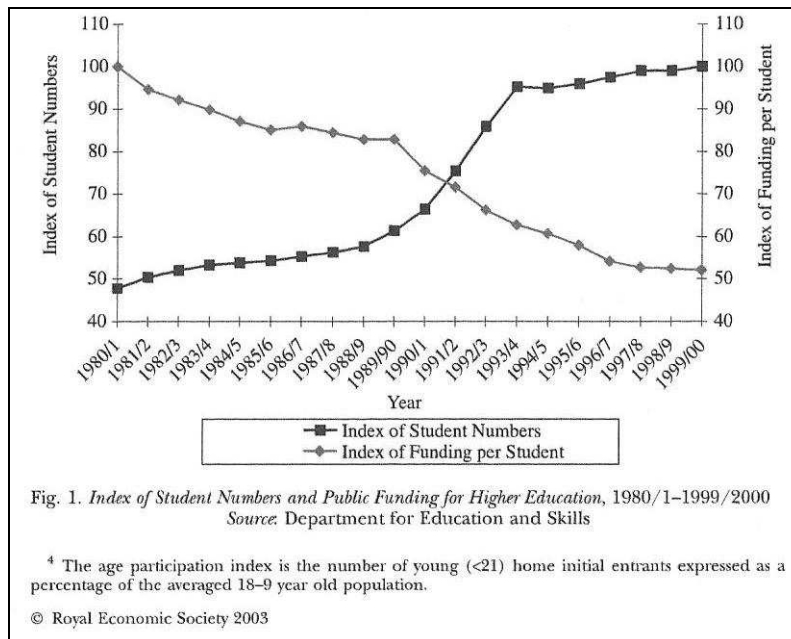
These figures illustrate the expansion in numbers of UK universities in the 1960s as recommended by the UGC (from 1958) and subsequently by the Robbins Report (1963) to accommodate the increases in student demand. The major increase in 1992 was the result of the Further and Higher Education Act (FHEA) when the polytechnics were upgraded to university status creating the combined higher education sector.

The situation stabilised in the decade after 1994 but by 2014, the number had increased to 123 (*Sunday Times* University League Tables, 21 September 2014).

Table 3.4: Higher Education Statistics for the UK
(from Higher Education Statistics Agency)

<i>Academic Year</i>	<i>Students at HEIs</i>	<i>Academic Staff</i>	<i>Recurrent Income (£millions)</i>	<i>All Expenditure (£millions)</i>
1994/95	1403600	114721	10038.5	9790.6
1999/00	1856330	135750	12799.7	12709.75
2003/04	2247440	150230	16867.2	16626.0
2013/14	2299355	194245	30582.3	29406.2

Figure 1: Index of student numbers and public funding for higher education, 1980/01-1999/00 (Greenaway and Haynes, 2003:152)



Permission to reproduce this figure has been granted by John Wylie and Sons.

Note:

This figure strikingly illustrates the relationship between rising student numbers and the relentless decline in funding per student which is a crucial theme in the history of quality assurance.

3.4 Quality assurance

Table 3.5: Definitions for quality assurance in higher education (DES, 1991: 60)

- Quality control: mechanisms within institutions for maintaining and enhancing the quality of their provision.
- Quality audit: external scrutiny aimed at providing guarantees that institutions have suitable quality control mechanisms in place.
- Validation: approval of courses by a validating body for the award of its degrees and other qualifications.
- Accreditation: in the specific context of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), delegation to institutions ... of responsibility for validating their own courses leading to CNAA degrees.
- Quality assessment: external review of, and judgements about, the quality of teaching and learning in institutions.

Higher Education: A New Framework (DES, 1991: 60)

Table 3.6: Fundamental questions for quality assurance (HEQC, 1994: 3)

- What are you trying to do?
- Why are you trying to do it?
- How are you doing it?
- Why are you doing it that way?
- Why do you think that is the best way of doing it?
- How do you know it works?
- How do you improve it?

HEQC, Division of Quality Audit, 1994

Table 3.7: Checklist for audit of quality assurance systems (HEQC, 1994: 45-52)**Entry to higher education**

Admissions policies
 Admission requirements
 Information for prospective students
 Pre-entry guidance
 The selection process
 Facilitating student entry

Quality of the student experience

The student experience
 Quality assurance and the diversity of higher education
 External and internal programme approval
 Programme information for students
 Teaching and learning
 Evaluation of programmes of study
 Evaluation of teaching and learning
 Quality enhancement
 Staff appointment, development and training and appraisal
 Quality of collaborative arrangements
 Postgraduate research studies
 Student support services
 Student grievance

Student outcomes

Student progress
 Student assessment
 Appeals
 External verification of standards
 External examiners

HEQC Guidelines on Quality Assurance (1994: 3)

Note:

The HEQC *Guidelines on Quality Assurance* (1994) provided a framework for quality assurance and control systems which institutions could adapt to suit their own circumstances. This checklist contains areas expected to be covered by quality audit.

Table 3.8: Documentation and Information required for teaching quality assessment (HEFCE, 1993, C3/93, Annex)

<p>Information required by Assessors</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-assessment in the subject: To include indicators used by the institution to reflect its mission and the aims and objectives of the area of work to be assessed. 2 Statistical indicators: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Entry Profile, showing the numbers entering with A-level qualifications (and the average A-level points score for those entrants), and the numbers entering with other qualifications eg BTEC, NCVQ, access courses, other qualifications. The profile should also cover modes of study and might include analysis by age, gender and ethnic background. An appropriate entry profile should also be given for postgraduate and sub-degree provision. b. Expenditure per student, covering all central administration and joint services expenditure, that is expenditure not attributed to teaching departments, per full-time equivalent student in the institution; and subject/departamental/cost centre expenditure (as appropriate) per full-time equivalent student. c. Progression and Completion Rates, based on the percentage of those enrolled who are subsequently successful at each stage of the course. d. Student Attainment, covering the results obtained, including degree classifications where relevant. e. Employment and further study, based on first destination data (effectively only relevant for graduates of full-time and sandwich courses); other destination data (say, in respect of part-time students or diplomats). <p>These data, which will be compiled and reviewed by the Council, will be shared with the institution</p>	<p>before the visit and the institution will be able to provide a commentary. Where the data are not held centrally, they will be sought from the institution.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Course documentation: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Description of education to be assessed. b. Subject information prepared for students. c. Subject monitoring/evaluation reports for the last three years, including those from professional bodies and students where appropriate. d. Examiners' reports for the last three years. e. Timetables for the period of the visit. f. Institutional prospectus. 4. Samples of written work, including examination papers, marking schemes (if used) and scripts, project reports and dissertations (to be available during the visit). 5. Details on: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Student intake and progression. b. Student welfare services. c. Staffing and staff development. 6. Academic development plans (where available). 7. Outline of management structure and arrangements for quality control. 8. Resources: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Resources relevant to the subject under assessment. b. Learning resources, including library and IT.
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Notes:

This contextual background information to be provided by the university would be based on the 'statistical indicators' used by the institution itself to measure trends against its own aims and objectives (C3/93: 21).

Additional information compiled by HEFCE would be sourced from national data sets: entry profile; expenditure per student; progression and completion rates; student attainment; employment and further study (C3/93: 22).

Table 3.9: Categories of quality assessment and terminology of gradings

1992-95	<p><u>Assessment of Teaching Quality</u> (HEFCE C 3/93: A:8)</p> <p>3 assessment categories in discipline or subject areas, judged against stated course aims and objectives: ‘excellent’, ‘satisfactory’ and ‘unsatisfactory’ An ‘unsatisfactory grade’ required re-assessment within 12 months.</p>
1995-2002	<p><u>Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA)</u> (HEFCE C 39/94)</p> <p>6 aspects of provision graded on a numerical scale of 1-4 to produce a ‘graded profile’: Curriculum development, content and organisation Teaching, learning and assessment Student progression and achievement Student support and guidance Learning resources Quality (assessment) management and enhancement</p> <p>Overall judgements of ‘quality approved’ or ‘subject to re-assessment within a year’. ‘Unsatisfactory quality’ not remedied within one year would result in ‘withdrawal of funding in whole or in part’.</p>
2002...	<p><u>QAA Institutional Audit</u> (QAA (2002) <i>Operational Description</i>, para 20)</p> <p>Institutions maintain an appropriate institutional infrastructure and conduct their own internal assessments and reviews. QAA Institutional Audits: reporting on levels of confidence in the institutions’ management of quality. Confidence ‘broad’, ‘limited’ or ‘absent’. QAA making recommendations in 3 categories: ‘essential’, ‘advisable’ and ‘desirable’.</p>

Table 3.10: ‘Results’ of teaching quality assessment, 1992-2001 (Brown, 2004)
(Information supplied to Roger Brown by Roger Cook, Napier University, 2002 and 2003)

<p><i>Brown’s chapter on Assessment (2004: 73-100) discussed figures for the successive rounds of TQA supplied to him by Roger Cook of Napier University. The following points are particularly relevant to this study:</i></p>							
1992-95	<p><u>HEFCE Percentage spread of grades awarded in 15 subjects in 144 institutions</u></p> <table> <tr> <td>Excellent</td><td>26.6%</td></tr> <tr> <td>Satisfactory:</td><td>72.1 %</td></tr> <tr> <td>Unsatisfactory:</td><td>1.3%</td></tr> </table> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(Brown, 2004: 75)</i></p>	Excellent	26.6%	Satisfactory:	72.1 %	Unsatisfactory:	1.3%
Excellent	26.6%						
Satisfactory:	72.1 %						
Unsatisfactory:	1.3%						
1995-2001	<p><u>HEFCE subject assessments of 6 ‘core’ aspects graded on a 4-point scale:</u></p> <p>Cook’s figures in Brown pp. 92-94 showed differing outcomes between subjects and types of institution which made consistent comparison difficult. <i>(Brown (2004: 78)</i></p> <p>Importantly, in a personal communication to Brown in May 2003, Cook pointed out that ‘out of 3,311 assessments, there [had] been only 35 published fails’. <i>(Brown, 2004: 97)</i></p>						

Note:

Cook, Brown, Underwood (1998 and 2000) and others pointed out that various inconsistencies in the assessment methodology made it difficult to draw comparisons from the figures. The most meaningful messages for this study were that the vast majority of institutions were seen to be achieving quality that was satisfactory or better and the number of courses from 1992 onwards judged to be ‘unsatisfactory’ or not meeting the required quality standard was very small.

Table 3.11: Quality Assurance Framework from 2002
 (summarised from JM Consulting, 2005: 7-9 © HEFCE 2005)

QAA Institutional Audit (from 2002):

- External audits of institutional QA systems on a 6-year cycle
- Published reports giving a view of confidence in university's management of quality:
- 3 levels of confidence: 'broad', 'limited' or 'absent'
- 3 categories of recommendation: 'essential', 'advisable', 'desirable'

Teaching Quality Information:

- New requirements to provide information specified by the Cooke Report (2002)
- Data on quality and standards for internal use
- Published data set for students, employers etc.
- National Student Survey of students' views of their own universities (from 2005)

Academic Infrastructure:

(Dearing recommendations developed by QA in consultation with the sector)

- Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* defining standards for academic awards
- National benchmark statements defining degree level work in different disciplines
- Institutional programme specifications
- Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in Higher Education*: statements of good practice and guidance that QAA will expect universities to follow

Universities' internal systems of quality control:

- Course approval
- Annual monitoring of programmes and student outcomes
- Student evaluation of courses
- Periodic review of programmes by department of discipline
- Review of students' work by external examiners

Table 3.12: Current HEI costs of external review on an annualised basis
(JM Consulting, 2005: 61, © HEFCE 2005)

	<i>Average per HEI £000s</i>	<i>England £m</i>
Academic QA (transition phase)		
Institutional audit	69	9.0
Discipline Audit Trails as part of audit	52	6.7
Developmental engagements	14	1.8
Foundation degree reviews	2	0.25
Provision for auditors for QAA	10	1.3
Total academic QA (QAF)	147	19.1
Professional QA		
Ofsted inspection of ITT	-	3.8
GMC review of medicine	-	1.5
Review of health provision	-	4.4
Inspection of FE	-	1.6
Inspection by PSRBs (excl health	-	9.9
Total professional QA	163	21.2
Total cost of external QA	310	40.3

Note:

This was the most comprehensive attempt to establish costs for quality assurance yet undertaken which estimated the combined annual costs for England of institutional audit by the QAA and ‘professional’ quality assurance by professional and public bodies as approximately £40m per annum.

This estimate included ‘the specific quantifiable costs of individual academic QA reviews’ including ‘lost’ academic time (JM Consulting, 2005, para. 4.58) but not the ‘opportunity cost’ of academics’ time which could have been devoted to other activities.

CHAPTER 4: 'A CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION'?

'The problems, which taken together we can properly call a crisis, have developed largely in the public life of British Higher Education – in its finance, governance and organization – rather than in its private life, in the areas of teaching and learning' (Trow 1988: 7).

4.1 Introduction: the old order

In the post-war period after 1945 it became apparent that the number of university places was not adequate to accommodate the increasing number of suitably qualified students and higher education in Britain underwent a period of rapid growth. Existing institutions were expanded and, on advice from the University Grants Committee, the government approved the establishment of seven new universities in England during the first half of the 1960s: Sussex, East Anglia, York, Lancaster, Kent, Essex and Warwick (Perkin, 1969). The Robbins Committee reported that in 1962/3 universities provided for the higher education of 118,000 full-time students which amounted to just 4% of the UK's 18-year-olds, (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: Table 3). By 1963, the report listed a total of 31 universities, including those still in development (Committee on Higher Education, para 56) but longer term estimates of a further shortfall in capacity by 1980 led the Committee to recommend that ten Colleges of Advanced Technology should be expanded and upgraded to university status and six more universities should be established in addition to those recently founded.

Estimated public expenditure on universities in 1962/63 was £129 million (Committee on Higher Education, Table 54). At this period, the funding allocation for higher education passed directly from the Treasury to the University Grants Committee (UGC) which was responsible for resource allocation and university policy development and worked in close partnership with the CVCP. Kogan and Hanney (2000: 143) recognised 'the buffer role of the UGC' which, as Shattock agreed, gave the universities 'a privileged position' in relation to funding and offered protection from external intervention by the state (Shattock, 2012: 109). Universities were institutions established by Royal Charter, which operated largely independently beyond public accountability for the teaching or research in which they were involved. During this period of expansion, academics enjoyed what Scott (1989: 9) described as a period of 'exceptional prestige' and security of employment ('tenure'). 'The universities exercised academic autonomy. Those who taught in them exercised academic freedom' (Alderman, 1996: 179).

The Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 25-28) had re-affirmed traditional ideals: although accepting that ‘instruction in skills’ was necessary to prepare students for future careers, a university education had a series of more lofty aspirations. It should ‘promote the general powers of the mind’, aiming to produce ‘not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women’. It should encompass research, ‘the search for truth’ seeking ‘the advancement of learning’, and should espouse a wider social mission, ‘the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship’ as a basis for ‘a healthy society’. Despite the continuing expression of this traditional view, however, the significant expansion of student numbers as well as new structures and approaches in these new institutions inevitably began to challenge the stability of the UK’s élite university system.

The second half of the 1960s also saw changes in professional and vocational education in what was then known as ‘the public sector’ of higher education, with the creation of a large number of polytechnics ‘to prepare students for the world of work’ (Alderman, 1996: 180). A new degree-awarding body, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) was created in 1965 with a remit to ensure that the polytechnics’ degree standards were comparable with those of universities, while a government-maintained body of Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMIs) was responsible for investigating and reporting on the quality of the educational experience offered. The polytechnics charged with preparing students for employment had close links with professional bodies and employers and the quality and standards of their courses were overseen by the CNAA. They operated at much lower cost than the universities since they maintained no research infrastructure. Both their governance and their funding arrangements were favoured by politicians and the polytechnics were seen as ‘an undoubted success story’ (Alderman, 1996: 181). These two parallel systems co-existed for over 20 years on either side of what had been described by Anthony Crosland, (Secretary of State for Education and Science, 1965-67), as ‘the binary line’ between traditional universities and more vocationally-oriented polytechnics (speech at Woolwich Polytechnic, 27 April, 1965).

4.2 *The Conservative political agenda 1979-87*

However, change was in the air. Carswell, a former secretary of the UGC, referred to the arrival of ‘a subsequent and cataclysmic period’ (1985: 159) ushered in by the election of a Conservative government, led by Margaret Thatcher, on a manifesto to reform all UK public services. Their goals of efficiency and effectiveness were embodied in an approach

which came to be known as ‘New Public Management’, described by Kogan and Hanney (2000: 31) as a ‘bundle of notions’ based on the principle of ‘devolved responsibilities for the delivery of centrally determined priorities’. To verify that public bodies were delivering value for money in their spending of public funds, new bodies were created to impose a régime of external audit on public sector organisations such as the NHS and local authorities (Power, 1994). Accountability was to be achieved by monitoring the delivery of services against key performance indicators and a corresponding increase in performance management of individual staff. Other key features of NPM identified by Pollitt (1995: 183) were the introduction of ‘quasi-markets’ in which competition was expected to raise quality with a growing emphasis on improving quality and attention to the views of the ‘customer’. The impact of these reforms on higher education became a major underlying theme in this thesis.

Almost all the interviewees in this study identified parallels between the higher education reforms and the treatment of other institutions in the public sector. As an academic and commentator on higher education throughout this period, Barnett reflected that the professions in general and the major public sector institutions ‘*started to come under political scrutiny in a way they hadn’t up to that point. There was a sense that the public sector was inefficient and needed to be reviewed, needed to be subject to state evaluation*’ (I: 8). Interviewee 1 expressed the majority view when he described the development during the late 1980s and early 1990s of what he referred to as ‘*the compliance culture*’ and how this was extended to higher education: ‘*You know, compliance in finance, compliance in the banking system, compliance in the health service, compliance in accountancy, compliance in the higher education sector – and we were just another state commodity*’ (I: 1).

4.3 Why quality? Concerns about higher education

The government’s agenda for reform of higher education was thus in keeping with its reforms right across the public sector. However, there were a number of reasons why it tackled change in higher education with particular zeal. From the early 1980s the government had begun to ask questions about the kind of education universities were offering to students, the quality of teaching and the standards being achieved. Above all, how far were they complying with the government’s requirements of efficiency and value for money and how much were they being shielded by the UGC? Contributors to a study

by Kogan and Hanney (2000) described a growing influence of the Treasury on higher education policy, explaining that Treasury officials had been sympathetic to the pro-university stance of the former UGC but the introduction of hardline financial policies during the 1980s had reduced their support. In the reform acts of 1988 and 1992, the government demonstrated ‘a striking willingness to upset the established structures and relationships of higher education’ (Watson and Bowden, 1999: 246).

4.3.1 An élite to a mass system

According to Alderman (1996: 184) the government had ‘put quality on the national agenda’ in order to be able to reassure the public that the expansion from an élite to a mass system would not entail a drop in standards. This view was borne out by several interviewees in this study. The problems were understandable: *‘the government was caught between a rock and a hard place of both needing to expand the system but also wanting to assure itself of the quality of the system’* (Barnett, I. 8). Several interviewees agreed that this concern about teaching quality was connected with the expansion of universities and reductions in funding. Against the background of rising student numbers in the ‘old’ universities, one former vice-chancellor recalled being aware of increasing government interest in quality during the late 1980s. *‘They worried about whether or not the students were getting a fair deal, was the quality of teaching being maintained?’* (I: 1). A senior academic viewed the government’s attitude to universities partly as *‘an example of how all public services [were] much more reviewed externally ... than they used to be, ... but it also coincided with a time when there was a likelihood that the quality of teaching would go down because of the changes in staff:student ratio and so forth’* (I: 2). From a political perspective, Blackstone took the view that although there was a recognisable general move towards greater regulation of publicly funded institutions, the main concern about quality in higher education was because the government had backed the policy of greatly increased student numbers without providing additional funding (I: 7). Sharp thought the increased political interest in higher education was easily explained *‘because at this time you were getting an increasing number of students coming through universities so it was affecting a much bigger proportion of the population’* (I: 4). Peter Williams, himself a major contributor to the history of quality assurance, also understood that from a practical point of view some kind of organisational changes would have been necessary to meet these challenges. *‘I don’t think one could have had a mass higher education system without a higher level of organisation. It just couldn’t be done: you couldn’t muddle through in the*

way that you might have done when 10% of the population was in higher education. You can't muddle through with 40%: the whole thing would just collapse' (I: 9).

4.3.2 Accountability and value for money

From his experience as first chair of the SHEFC Quality Assessment Committee and subsequently chair of SHEFC itself, Masters felt that the government's main aim was accountability rather than a desire for political control: *'I don't think it was political control. I disagree with that... I think there was a view that if you are giving vast sums of money to something, then you have a responsibility to make sure those funds are well used'* (I: 5). With the increasing emphasis on value for money across all public sector services, it seemed reasonable that higher education should not be exempt from the requirement to demonstrate the value and quality it was offering to the tax-payer. Interviewee 10 accepted that accountability for the increased financial burden imposed on the public purse by the expanding higher education sector was *'the conventional answer'* to questions about the origins of concerns about quality. However, he was not persuaded that there were any *'specific linkages'* between developments in higher education and other areas of government *'because higher education policy was then anyway a very self-contained kind of sphere even within the Department for Education. I think university civil servants might have been aware of the general push of New Public Management and all of that, but I doubt if that was anything other than a very broad contextual factor'* (I: 10).

On the other hand, Interviewee 6, a former civil servant with extensive experience in further and higher education who was close to these events at the time, believed that the government's principal intention, driven by the Treasury, was to create clearer lines of accountability to ensure that the universities were delivering value for money. As he saw it, the Treasury's main focus was on the extremely high cost of higher education in comparison with other areas of post-school education so the government was greatly influenced by a desire *'to improve the quality of the output from the universities to justify their high unit cost... That may well be at the heart of government thinking as to why the quality of university education became an issue'* (I: 6).

Certainly, Conservative Education Ministers from Keith Joseph onwards laid great emphasis on financial accountability to the anonymous 'taxpayer' for the spending of public money, with pressure to deliver both high quality and value for money. This theme

was taken up by Kenneth Baker in a speech to the 1988 CVCP conference when he asked his audience whether academics accepted ‘an obligation to give an account of their stewardship to their customers and the tax-paying public?’ (CVCP Archive, 15 January 1988, quoted by Shattock, 2012: 188). Similarly, when explaining the rationale behind the introduction of quality assurance in the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, Alan Howarth, the Minister for Higher Education, used this argument to the CVCP: ‘The taxpayer has a right to know what is being provided in return for public funding. Prospective students and sponsors also have a right to know the quality of courses on offer’ (CVCP files, 25 September 1991, quoted by Shattock, 2012: 201).

4.3.3 Higher education for the economy

Another government priority was to improve the quality of higher education both to boost the employability of new graduates and to update the skills and knowledge of the existing workforce, particularly in science and technology. Successive policy documents on the development of higher education stressed the need for higher education to contribute more effectively to the economy by producing graduates qualified to work in industry (DES 1985: 187). With this in mind, organisations representing industry and business such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Institute of Directors (IoD) had not been consistently supportive of the government policy of university expansion or convinced that graduates were being adequately prepared for the world of work. Interviewee 6 recalled business leaders and employers also raising concerns that UK graduates were unprepared for employment: *‘they certainly weren’t entrepreneurial: they hadn’t been taught to develop in a business sense... Courses were out of date and not sufficiently relevant to employers’ needs’* (I: 6). He believed it was justified that if the universities were *‘taking the cream of our young people, they ought to be doing at least a bit more thinking about what skills these young people need to make Britain an effective economic power in the future’* (I: 6) and commended government initiatives such as the Enterprise in Higher Education scheme³ which were introduced into universities to prepare graduates for employment. Although for him *‘the notion that government should be interested in the efficiency of higher education and in the outcomes, including employability’* seemed completely justified, he remembered that these measures *‘to stimulate change in the HE curriculum and learning styles and to develop entrepreneurial skills’* had been received as an unprecedented intervention that *‘completely shocked the universities’* (I: 6). Barnett

³ A government-funded initiative introduced in 1987 to stimulate an entrepreneurial culture in universities and equip undergraduates with the necessary skills for employment.

linked these initiatives in universities with the development of a new public debate about 'skills' and 'competences' and speculated whether the introduction of the quality system with its industrial origins might be '*a proxy or a vehicle for realigning the character of higher education in the UK*' in order to fulfil the government requirement to meet the needs of industry (I: 8).

4.3.4 Quality: an international concern

During this period, there was evidence that quality assurance was becoming an international issue with the increasing mobility of students leading to comparisons between universities in the global market. Gordon (1993: 15) pointed out that by the end of the 1980s, quality was already the focus of attention in other European countries and the emphasis on accountability for public funds and pressure to demonstrate evidence for 'efficient, economical and effective management of resources' was a policy adopted not only by the Thatcher government in the UK but also by politicians of differing political persuasions in other countries. The search for systems to demonstrate public accountability was becoming an international trend not dependent on party political persuasion. In 1991, delegates from over 20 countries attended a conference in Hong Kong to discuss international developments in quality assurance (Craft, 1992). Holmes (1993) reported that the management of quality in higher education was beginning to be addressed at European level: the establishment of the Single European Market had promoted the exchange of information and the development of some common arrangements. In a study of quality assurance trends in Western Europe, Green (1993) discovered the difficulty of drawing general conclusions from the often volatile situations in different countries. On the other hand, while universities were at different stages in the implementation of quality assurance, they were often facing similar issues. Challenges arising from the definition and measurement of quality, the controversial nature of comparative judgements, tensions between accountability and improvement and issues of workload and costs were becoming ever greater as higher education became increasingly international. Indeed Green (1993: 11) envisaged a 'nightmare scenario' in which universities would be subject to 'external scrutiny by teams not only from dozens of domestic stakeholders, but also their European and international counterparts!' Interviewee 2, formerly Vice-Principal for Learning and Teaching in a pre-92 university, commented that it was important to consider the international dimension: '*you have to remember of course all the time that these things were going on in other countries as well*' (I: 2). He believed that while the UK might have been the first country to introduce the 'industrial' model of quality assurance, there were

other models being developed simultaneously in Europe and some Commonwealth countries such as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

To many academics, concerns about quality seemed misplaced because the international reputation of British higher education was apparently riding high. For example in 1989 the French magazine *Libération* (December 1989) had reported the results of a survey to identify Europe's leading universities in 21 subject areas which showed British universities highly positioned in almost all subject areas. Johnson (1994: 379) wrote that in his experience there were 'many grounds for concluding that British universities have generally been both responsible and efficient, providing a serious education for their students and ensuring a high success rate at graduation'. However, the quality of higher education remained an important factor for a country's international reputation about which politicians were highly sensitive.

4.4 Changes ahead

There were thus several reasons why the government's concerns about the state of higher education had been simmering for some time. As early as November 1980, the chairman of the UGC, Sir Edward Parkes, gave a lecture to the CVCP which alerted them by both its content and tone that changes were on the way. He warned them to expect 'a somewhat greater degree of direct intervention by the UGC in the affairs of individual universities' and cautioned them in stark terms against 'mulish opposition to any form of change based upon a sterile application of a concept of academic freedom which may be the surest way to its destruction' (Lecture to CVCP, November, 1980, quoted by Griffith, 1989: 51).

Awareness of the additional pressures on universities from rising student numbers accompanied by the swingeing funding cuts implemented in the 1981 spending round led Ministers to seek increased scrutiny of the standards and quality of higher education. On 17 July 1982, Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education, wrote to the Chairman of the UGC to enquire '...what prospects there [were] for more radical changes directed to the maintenance and improvement of quality in the context of a more efficient use of resources?'. In 1983, responding to this ministerial interest in academic standards the CVCP set up an Academic Standards Group under the chairmanship of Philip Reynolds, Vice-Chancellor of Lancaster University. Over the next five years, the group produced a series of formal codes of practice on a number of aspects of academic work such as external examiners, post-graduate training and the monitoring of courses. These reports contained a clear assertion of the universities' independence: 'The character and quality of

education in British Universities were not created by Government or Parliament... The Universities themselves must undertake the scrutiny' (*The Reynolds Reports*, CVCP, 1986: 10). However, this message was not sufficient to divert the government from its course.

4.4.1 A drive for efficiency: the Jarratt Report, 1985

In 1980 Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for the Environment, had issued a clarion call on behalf of efficiency:

'Efficient management is the key to the [national] revival . . . and the management ethos must run right through our national life – private and public companies, civil service, nationalized industries, local government, the National Health Service.' (Quoted by Pollitt, 1993: vi.)

In 1985, as a way of indicating cooperation with the government's agenda, the CVCP voluntarily opted to lead a review of efficiency in universities, one of a series of inquiries being conducted throughout government departments. The Steering Committee for Efficiency Studies in the Universities under the chairmanship of a former industrialist, Sir Alex Jarratt, turned its attention to university management. The proposals in the Jarratt Report 'came to symbolise a central drive towards a new corporate management approach to the running of universities' which greatly influenced future developments (Shattock, 2012: 220). Though many of its proposals were supported by university leaders, others were resisted, particularly the shift of power from academics to managers which did little to enhance the popularity of the CVCP with university staff.

4.4.2 1985 Green Paper: *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s*

An education Green Paper introduced by Joseph in 1985 developed these themes, proposing that 'individual academic staff and those with responsibility for management and leadership in institutions need to pay continuing attention to the quality of teaching' (DES, 1985: 1.7). This would entail increased scrutiny of standards and a particular emphasis on efficiency. The Green Paper also began to set out the government's proposals for how the quality of education might be measured which included ideas borrowed from quality assurance methods in manufacturing industry. There was increasing emphasis on the responsibility of the universities to promote high quality research and technological innovation and to produce graduates well-qualified to contribute to the economy. Joseph drove home the seriousness of the government's message in a speech to the CVCP, stating

his lack of confidence that ‘the universities in particular ... are conscious of the weight of responsibility that they bear for the monitoring and preservation of their own standards’ (CVCP, 1985).

It is important to note that the pressures for reform during this period related only to the old-established universities in the traditional sector. Based on close personal involvement in the development of quality assurance, Interviewee 10 explained that ‘*as there were as yet only rudimentary means of regulating quality in that sector, it was quite natural for ministers, civil servants and others to ask whether all was well with quality in those institutions*’ (I: 10). On the other hand, the polytechnics and colleges, with their own ‘*accrediting agency, the CNAA, and the parallel but separate inspection régime in the HMI*’ (I: 10) were not affected by structural reforms until they too became subject to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which created the combined sector.

4.5 The power of politicians

4.5.1 The Iron Lady

But there was a further dimension to the Thatcher government’s attitude to the universities. From his UGC experience, Carswell (1985: 159) had observed how during this period the previously close ‘personal and social’ links between university leaders and government departments were gradually changing to a ‘formal and ultimately adversarial relationship’. The Prime Minister herself was the dominant force in government, stamping her views on policy and the force of her personality on its implementation. According to Jenkins (1995: 2) her leadership was ‘autocratic, personalized and radical’ and her mistrust of professionals and élite groups made her reluctant to consult with those affected by her reforms (Kogan and Hanney, 2000: 34). Her biographer, Campbell (2003), attributed her attitude to universities to her own not particularly happy time at Oxford and to later encounters with left-wing student demonstrators in the early 1970s. Her view of higher education had been reinforced during her term as Education Secretary in the early 1970s when she criticised the civil servants in the DES for being ‘self-righteously socialist’ (Thatcher, 1995: 166). She blamed some intellectuals and academics for corrupting young minds with ‘poison’ (Campbell, 2003: 396) while still expecting to be funded by the state, and she was further alienated in 1981 when 364 economists wrote a letter to *The Times* severely criticising her deflationary economic policy (Jenkins, 1995: 142). The strength of the universities’ resentment of her policies was further demonstrated in 1985 when the Oxford dons voted by a majority of more than two to one against a proposal to award her

an honorary degree, thus withholding a customary honour accorded prime ministers who had been educated at Oxford (Campbell, 2003: 396). The polarisation of academics' political views was further revealed by a poll just before the 1987 general election which showed that only 18% of university lecturers were planning to vote Conservative (Campbell, 2003: 395).

The antipathy between the Prime Minister and the academic world was summed up in strong language by Campbell (2003: 395): 'the great majority of university teachers loathed her, and she candidly despised them'. The development of this 'passionate mutual hostility' between the Prime Minister and the universities (Russell, 1993: ix) became a symptom of a long-standing opposition between the government and the universities.

4.5.2 Ministers

Following Thatcher's example, successive Ministers for Education expressed criticisms of the current state of higher education, the universities' lack of accountability and the alleged *laissez-faire* attitude of academics. Amann (1995: 472) wrote of the Thatcher government's encouragement of 'the assumption that many professional people in the public sector enjoyed cushioned lifestyles and pursued their own agendas which were disconnected from the real needs of ordinary people'. Fierce loyalty to the Prime Minister was expected, to the extent that Nigel Lawson as Chancellor of the Exchequer reacted to Oxford's rejection of Thatcher by announcing that he would grant no more money to that university (Jenkins, 1995:142). In his autobiography, Lawson (1992: 600) criticised the DES whose ethos he regarded as 'wholly opposed to that of the government' and his period as Chancellor (1983-89) was characterised by pressure from the Treasury to bring the universities under stricter financial control.

The style of the Thatcher administration and the personal impact which she and her ministers made on how government policies were implemented were a major challenge for the universities. A former civil servant, Tom Kelly, recalled '*a sort of Thatcherite hostility to embedded interest groups who not only subverted but set out to subvert every initiative for change and improvement that ministers came up with*' (I: 3). This mistrust of professional interest groups was an underlying cause of 'the speed and ruthlessness of Conservative decision making on higher education' highlighted by Watson and Bowden (1999: 253). The radical higher education reforms, of which quality assurance was an important element, thus became what Jenkins described as 'one of her most vigorous nationalisations' (*THES*, 13 October 1995). The consequences for academics of loss of

tenure, decline in status and erosion of their salaries relative to other groups resulted in what Campbell described as ‘a brain-drain of talent and a demoralisation of the whole academic community’ which in turn became a serious loss to the country. Against this background ‘inevitably the quality of the education provided – and certainly the quality of the experience – declined’ (Campbell, 2003: 400)

The dominant influence of individual ministers in implementing policy meant that they were the ‘key actors in the 1980s and 1990s’ (Kogan and Hanney, 2000: 36). Frequent ministerial changes were a characteristic of the DES in the Thatcher government and major policy shifts were usually the result of such changes, in particular the appointments of Joseph, Baker and Clarke. Watson and Bowden (1999: 247) identified a pattern in the succession of Conservative Ministers where ‘activists’ were followed by ‘consolidators’, with corresponding fluctuations in reforming activity. For example Joseph’s temperamental reluctance to infringe university autonomy gave way to Baker’s reforming zeal which led to the publication of the White Paper, *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (1987) within a year of his taking office. According to Jenkins (1996: 142) ‘the change was total’. Kogan and Hanney (2000: 168) believed that ‘Clarke had been radical as Secretary of State for Health,’ so a similar attitude could be expected when he moved to Education in 1992. Discussing the momentous decision to grant polytechnics full university status, they reflected that while some other ministers, such as Joseph or Patten, would have been temperamentally unlikely to take such action, for Clarke ‘it was an almost casual decision, even if backed by official advice’ (Kogan and Hanney, 2000: 138). One contributor to their study commented that ‘Baker and Clarke in their action on unification took decisions and gave the appearance of consulting afterwards ... they sought change as might Panzer Generals’ (Kogan and Hanney, 2000: 138-139).

Table 4.1: Secretaries of State for Education, 1979-2004

<i>Secretary of State</i>	<i>Terms of Office</i>	<i>Department Name</i>	<i>Prime Minister</i>
Mark Carlisle	May 1979-September 1981	Education & Science	Margaret Thatcher
Keith Joseph	September 1981- May 1986	Education & Science	
Kenneth Baker*	May 1986- July 1989	Education & Science	
John MacGregor	July 1989-November 1990	Education & Science	
Kenneth Clarke*	November 1990-April 1992	Education & Science	John Major
John Patten	April 1992-July 1994	Education	
Gillian Shephard	July 1994-July 1995	Education	
Gillian Shephard	July 1995-May 1997	Education & Employment	
David Blunkett	May 1997-June 2001	Education & Employment	Tony Blair
Estelle Morris	June 2001-October 2002	Education & Skills	
Charles Clarke*	October 2002-December 2004	Education & Skills	

* Education Acts of 1988, 1992 and 2004 were passed during their terms of office.

4.5.3 Higher education policy ‘piecemeal and pragmatic’

Commenting on his experience of the Thatcher government, Richard Bird, a senior civil servant with responsibility for higher education in the DES during the 1980s, recalled that ‘most of the significant developments of that decade happened in a piecemeal and pragmatic fashion’ (Bird, 1994: 83). Jenkins (1995: 11) agreed that ‘Thatcherism’ was never ‘a coherent set of principles but rather ‘a mélange of crisis management and U-turns’ and both the Thatcher/Major years were characterised by ‘intense political turbulence’.

Some policy themes remained consistent throughout the period of reform, e.g the overall increase in student numbers, the desire for government control, the responsibility of higher education to contribute to the economy, pressure on the universities to deliver efficiency and value for money. On the other hand, a series of about-turns by successive ministers throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s meant that John Patten, Education Minister from 1992-94, found the government ‘apparently simultaneously committed to reducing costs, expansion, diversity, high quality and preservation of comparable outcome standards for awards’ (Watson and Bowden, 1999: 247). Another source of confusion for universities was the government’s ambivalence about the idea of a higher education “market” as a ‘guiding philosophy’ (Bird, 1994: 83). Though Kenneth Baker, architect of the 1987 White Paper, had expressed a desire for ‘a system where expansion would be determined by student demand’ (Baker, 1993: 234), this was not achieved in practice. Concern at the very rapid expansion following the 1992 Act caused HEFCE (under instruction from the Treasury) to introduce strict controls on student numbers in 1994 (Shattock, 2012) a sudden *volte face* which had serious consequences for the universities.

4.6 A ‘crisis’ in higher education?

From the end of the 1980s the titles of a number of books and articles expressed academics’ growing unease that current changes in the universities were beyond their control. Their level of anxiety was indicated by such titles as *The Crisis in Higher Education* (Reeves, 1988), *The Threat to Higher Education* (Griffiths, 1989), and *Decline of Donnish Dominion* (Halsey, 1992). The contributors to an edited book by Ball and Eggins (1989) explored the tensions involved in the ‘new dimensions’ of higher education while McNay (1992: 1) identified the ‘change, contradiction and confusion’ which characterised his ‘visions of post-compulsory education’.

Many academics regretted the shift of universities from their traditional 19th century role as custodians of culture and values towards a duty to contribute to the national economy, the adoption of a 'bleak accountant's view of higher education, as a kind of servicing industry which needs to pull up its socks and pay its way' (David Watt, *The Times*, 31 May 1985). Reeves (1988: 1) made the important distinction between 'education for use' and 'education for delight' and lamented the increasing dominance of the former over learning for personal fulfilment. Several commentators described the culture shock for academics, particularly symbolised by changes in language. As Morrell wrote (1992: 17) suddenly 'enterprise and management were good: welfare and consensus were bad' and the destruction of old academic structures was inevitably leading to some negative changes: 'with the bathwater of committees have gone out the babies of consensus, involvement and identification with policy'. Oppressive management and competition were threatening old relationships and academic loyalties as evidenced by three surveys undertaken by Halsey between 1964 and 1989 which attributed the lowered morale of academics to a reduction in public respect, diminishing career prospects and reduction in financial security through loss of tenure. Scott (1989: 10) also drew attention to the negative reactions to the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise in 1986 which 'was seen as an invasion of the private life of universities, a gross intrusion by politicians from outside higher education and managers within into academic questions'. The government-imposed funding cuts and accompanying demands for efficiency were presenting fundamental challenges to universities' traditional way of life. These disruptive changes besetting higher education and the uncertain future before them were seen by many academics as serious enough to represent a 'crisis' in their lives and many of these themes feature in the narrative as the history of quality assurance unfolds.

CHAPTER 5: LEGISLATIVE REFORMS, 1987-92

'... a veritable revolution in British higher education' (Alderman, 1996: 182).

5.1 Introduction: regulation of higher education

The government's main concern was not that higher education had lacked awareness of the need to maintain quality and standards: 'British higher education has always prided itself on its exposure to systematic peer review' (Watson, 1995: 326). However, the starting point had traditionally been that universities themselves were officially responsible for these important aspects of their provision (Reynolds, 1986). Interviewee 2 felt that the underlying cause of intervention was mainly about power: *'it was really to a significant extent about the government showing who's boss rather than about anything in the outcome'* (I: 2).

The level of independence hitherto enjoyed by universities had largely protected them from scrutiny: Williams referred to the prevailing impression that academics lived in *'this secret garden with this priesthood, and they [kept] it all to themselves in the holy of holies,'* (I: 9). Though university education was largely funded by the state, there had been 'an unwritten convention' that government did not interfere with the conduct of universities: 'he who paid the piper did not call the tune' (Alderman, 1996: 181). Many in the academic world believed that universities were a special case. Blackstone, who was both an academic and a politician, took the view that, although there was a recognisable general move towards greater regulation of publicly funded institutions, universities stood somewhat apart from this. *'They're not defined in quite the same way as public sector institutions. They are deemed to be independent and autonomous but in receipt of public funds ... not part of the public sector in quite the same way,'* (I: 7).

However, the government made clear that the level of autonomy previously enjoyed by the universities was no longer acceptable and future legislation would pursue their aim of holding academics to account. Baker's White Paper (DES, 1987) set out the main elements of the Government's policies for reforms designed to 'improve the effectiveness of the system' (DES, 1987: iv). It was described by Simon Jenkins (1995: 145) as a 'devastating document' and the tone and content of its proposals left no doubt that the future of the universities was going to be very different. This chapter shows how quality became an

important factor in the implementation of these reforms and identifies the roots of long-lasting tensions within the sector which have become a major focus of this study.

5.2 1987 White Paper, Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge

5.2.1 Aims of higher education

The double-edged meaning of the White Paper's title quickly became apparent: in defining its view of the kind of higher education necessary to ensure Britain's place in the world, it was also warning the universities of the challenge they would have to meet in adapting themselves to this task. Its opening section stated the government's view that the primary purpose of higher education was now to 'serve the economy more effectively' and claimed that '*above all* there [was] an urgent need ...for higher education to take increasing account of the economic requirements of the country'. In order to do this, student numbers would be increased and universities should forge 'closer links with industry and commerce, and promote enterprise' (DES, 1987: iv).

The whole of the White Paper was couched in the familiar terms of Thatcherite doctrine, focusing on 'effectiveness' and 'efficiency' and imbued with reforming zeal. Higher education was to be judged in terms of its 'productivity' (3.3) and its efforts to seek 'better value from the very large sums of public money made available' (3.4). Indeed, the government wished 'to see all higher education institutions do more to attract private funding' (4.2). Institutions should encourage 'close communication between academic staff and people in business at all levels' on the assumption that this would lead to 'more suitable teaching' (1.4). Recognising that institutions would have to adapt their teaching methods to accommodate new types of student who might not have the 'traditional qualifications for entry', the government reiterated its policy of 'maintaining and raising standards', claiming that 'increased participation in higher education need not be at the expense of academic excellence' (2.15).

5.2.2 Quality

Chapter 3 of the White Paper linked 'Quality and Efficiency' and outlined what this would entail in practical terms. The threatening opening statement 'higher education is expensive,' (3.1) left no doubt that one of the government's primary concerns was

financial. Though recent increases in the ‘productivity’ of higher education were welcomed, with higher numbers of students being educated at lower costs, further gains in value for money were necessary. Responsibility for achieving the two possibly conflicting goals of ‘quality’ and ‘efficiency’ (3.4) would fall on the ‘academic community’ who were expected not only to maintain but to *improve* standards and to have systems in place to monitor the results (3.5). Evidence about teaching quality would be a crucial factor in reassuring the public.

Judgements about quality were expected to include scrutiny of academic standards, teaching, research and the achievements of students (3.6). While paying lip-service to the principle that quality in higher education could not be ‘created or imposed from outside’, the White Paper warned that the government, ‘on behalf of the public’, would adopt a monitoring role (3.5). It expressed little confidence in the CVCP’s ability to monitor the work of universities, but emphasised the government’s intention to ‘maintain its own concern with the preservation and enhancement of quality in teaching’ (3.7).

A section headed ‘The Quality of Teaching’ (3.12-3.13) gave a list of ‘systematic arrangements’ to promote high standards of teaching: feedback from students, monitoring of the results achieved and graduate employment patterns; and ‘systematic staff appraisal of a kind already ‘widely accepted in the public and private sectors’ (3.13). Paragraph 3.15 introduced the idea of some ‘key criteria’ by which academic standards and the quality of teaching might be judged. Assessments of quality were thus to play a central role in implementing the framework of control.

5.2.3 How to measure quality?

The government’s growing preoccupation with quality meant that the difficulty of measuring teaching quality had been widely acknowledged. A Circular Letter from the Chairman of the UGC in 1985 rather disarmingly admitted that ‘there are few indicators of teaching performance that would enable a systemic external assessment of teaching quality... The committee would be glad to be told how to do it,’ (UGC 22/85, quoted by Kogan and Hanney, 2000: 104).

As part of the drive for accountability, the Jarratt Report (1985) had criticised the absence of performance indicators in the strategic management of higher education and recommended stricter systems of monitoring universities’ activities, notably including

teaching quality. A wide range of indicators were proposed, ‘covering both inputs and outputs and designed for use both within individual institutions and for making comparisons between institutions’ (Jarratt, 1985: 36). These ideas had been warmly welcomed by the DES, whose thinking was developed further in the 1987 White Paper. Their starting point was that ‘academic standards and the quality of teaching in higher education need to be judged by reference mainly to students’ achievements,’ which needed to be judged against their entry standards (DES, 1987: 18). Suggested performance indicators included numbers and class distribution of degrees, non-completion rates, external examiners’ reports, and students’ first employment destinations. The government emphasised that ‘the essential data on performance in each institution should be published so that its record [could] be evaluated by the funding agencies, governing bodies, students and employers’ (DES 1987: 18). The universities would thus become publicly accountable to a number of external ‘stakeholders’ with different interests in their performance. Easier said than done.

In 1987, a joint UGC/CVCP Working Group was given a remit to develop and publish annually a range of *quantitative* indicators relating to inputs, process and outputs, intended to aid university management and to increase public accountability. However many commentators pointed out shortcomings in this approach to the measurement of higher education. The CNAA cautioned against interpreting quality simply through statistics: ‘institutions of higher education are institutions founded on processes of human interaction and personal development. The language of arithmetic can only offer a crude insight into the effectiveness of these processes’ (CNAA, 1989, quoted by Loder and Williams, 1990: 8).

In an influential study of the measurement of performance in higher education, Johnes and Taylor (1990: 181) once again emphasised that different performance indicators required to be developed for sections of the public sector (including education) to which ‘normal commercial criteria (e.g. profitability)’ were not applicable. They explained the dilemma of ‘attempting to measure the extent to which the higher education sector is achieving objectives which are themselves not subject to quantifiable measurement,’ but also addressed the even greater problems that arose when attempting to assess the *quality* of educational outputs (Johnes and Taylor, 1990: 54). It was so far unclear what information could contribute to a meaningful evaluation of how each university was achieving its own objectives, let alone making comparisons between them and they illustrated the particular challenge of establishing a robust statistical basis for assessing performance ‘across several

indicators simultaneously' (Johnes and Taylor, 1990: 174). They concluded that there was as yet no sign of consensus among universities about which indicators to choose or how they should be weighted. In conclusion they cautioned against reliance on 'an excessively narrow range of *quantifiable* performance indicators', commenting that 'no one has yet devised even a *single* indicator of performance which commands wide support amongst the academic community' (Johnes and Taylor, 1990: 185).

From early on, these problems were fully apparent to academics. Early objectors such as Becher (1989: 166) warned against applying 'quasi-objective performance indicators to an organization as complex and diverse as a university,' while Scott (1989: 11) explained that 'attempts to develop quantitative measures of academic performance are regarded with great suspicion, and even contempt. The assessment of quality is seen as a matter of judgement by peers rather than measurement by managers'. Disputes about measurement became one of the key elements of the quality debate.

5.2.4 Efficiency

It was in the section headed 'Efficiency' that the government's plans to reform the universities were most starkly revealed. Efficiency was explicitly linked with quality in that both would depend on 'the skill and commitment of individuals at all levels' but again there was an external role for the government in ensuring that suitable arrangements were in place 'to promote and monitor efficiency' (3.23). Annual reports on 'a range of efficiency and effectiveness measures covering all universities' were to be published annually from 1987 (3.27). Slipped in at the end of the list was the intention to limit the granting of tenure to academic staff: forthcoming legislation would be brought forward to end tenured contracts for new appointments (3.28). In short, universities were expected to become more business-like.

5.2.5 A new funding régime

The White Paper also announced abolition of the long-established UGC which had provided some protection from cuts in funding and political encroachment on the universities' independence during the early 1980s (4.40). This was to be replaced with a new Universities Funding Council (UFC) directly responsible to the Department of Education with a minority of academic members and a chairman 'with substantial experience outside the academic world' (4.39). The previous block grant was to be replaced by a contract under which the government would be buying services from the

universities. This ushered in a new commercial relationship described by the chief executive of the new UFC in a speech to the CVCP in 1987:

‘Ministers are no longer thinking in terms of grants, however calculated, but in terms of buying certain services from universities. The bulk of those services are research and teaching. The Government is here a single purchaser, faced with an array of competing suppliers. It will use the power which the situation gives it to press for higher quality and greater efficiency, just as Marks and Spencer (for example) does in similar circumstances’ (Swinerton-Dyer, 1987).

It was not surprising then that this White Paper sent shockwaves through the university world. Despite the concession that British higher education might be ‘among the best in the world’ (para.1.2), the pervading tone was one of reproach: higher education had fallen short of the acceptable standard (though this was undefined) and must ‘improve’, ‘do better’, ‘enhance’, across the whole range of its activities – teaching, research, planning, financial management. It appeared to many academics as a manifesto for government control.

5.3 *Early opposition*

5.3.1 Academic freedom and the threat to tenure

The ensuing Education Reform Bill contained radical proposals to reform both schools and universities. The major issues of principle were examined in a book by Lord Conrad Russell (1993), himself an academic and a member of the House of Lords, who recognised that the ‘intellectual power and prestige’ currently enjoyed by academics equipped them admirably to enter the political fray (Russell, 1993: 2). The resistance from the existing universities was exemplified by a celebrated debate on the second reading of the Education Reform Bill (House of Lords, 18-19 April, 1988) attended by many senior politicians and a number of present and former vice-chancellors and the Chancellor of Oxford University.

The essence of the debate was a clash between the power of the state and the autonomy of universities: how far should government control over state funding extend into oversight of how that money was used? Or, from the universities’ point of view, how far should accountability for state funding encroach on matters of academic judgement and their autonomy in the spheres of research and teaching? Many saw the 1987 White Paper as ‘an assault by the State on the Universities’ (Russell, 1993: 3) and expressed the depth of their resentment through the power of their rhetoric. Russell himself likened the new bill to ‘the

worst threat to university autonomy since the University of Oxford refused to support King Henry VIII over his divorce' (Hansard, House of Lords debate, 19 April, 1988).

The new conditions under which academics might be dismissed 'by reason of redundancy' or for 'good cause' were a major threat to academic freedom. Although the concept of tenure might be seen by many members of the public 'as a shelter behind which the idle and the incompetent seek refuge,' according to Lord Kirkwood, it remained 'a vital privilege which underpins academic freedom – the freedom to criticise, to do research and to publish without interference from political or commercial interests.' Lord Hatch agreed that these freedoms were 'not a licence to brood comfortably in ivory towers,' (19 January 1988). Looking back, Interviewee 3 distilled the essential elements of academic freedom which academics believed to be under threat: *'the freedom of the academic specialists to concentrate on their own specialism within the broad subject, and academic freedom in the more obvious sense of not being told what to do by ministers,'* (I. 3).

Despite widespread opposition from many commentators (e.g. Tight, 1998, Becher, 1989, Scott, 1989) most of the White Paper's proposals were enshrined in legislation in the Education Reform Act of 1988. However an amendment moved by Lord Jenkins on 19 May 1988 was inserted into Section 202:

'to ensure that academic staff have freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinion without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges they may have at their institutions' (Education Reform Act, 1988, Section 202).

5.3.2 The Education Reform Act, 1988

Table 5.1: Provisions of the Education Reform Act, 1988

- Abolition of UGC and establishment of 2 new Funding Councils (UFC and PCFC) to disburse funding to Universities and Polytechnics/Colleges
- Arrangements for accounting and auditing control to lie with the DES
- Universities to have small audit committees composed of senior lay people (Griffith, 1989:56)
- Arrangements for internal audit with HE Internal Audit Unit to have access to university books
- Funding Councils given power to commission VFM studies about different aspects of work
- Ending of academic 'tenure' through introduction of redundancy provisions to enable restructuring and re-organisation of work
- Concession to 'academic freedom' in Jenkins amendment

The emphasis on greater audit scrutiny of the universities in the 1988 Education Reform Act were strongly influenced by a financial crisis in University College Cardiff in 1987.

In a strongly worded article entitled 'The Threat to Higher Education' Griffith (1989: 61) prophesied that in time these new statutory powers would enable the DES to 'interfere at will in the day-to-day operations as well as the decision-making processes of the institutions of higher education'. Furthermore, anticipating the results of the loss of tenure, he anticipated an increase in short-term contracts which could mean that for many academics 'especially the newest recruits to the profession, life is likely to be nasty, brutish and short' (Griffith, 1989: 59). He spoke for many academics when he described such proposals as a 'massive overkill of higher education' Griffith (1989: 52).

5.4 Universities fight back

5.4.1 The Academic Audit Unit

Following the largely fruitless attempts to conserve some of their independence through the Jarratt and Reynolds Reports, the CVCP made one further attempt in 1990 to defend the autonomy of the traditional universities. Concerned that the government in its new interventionist mode might wish to extend to the universities the HMI role exercised by the CNAA over the polytechnics and colleges sector, they decided to take action. As Interviewee 1 explained, *'at that stage a group of us in the old CVCP thought we better try and outflank the government, so we set up in Birmingham the Academic Audit Unit'* (I: 1). This strategy was rightly recognised 'as a ploy by the CVCP to forestall ... governmental or HMI intrusion' (Booth and Roper, 1992: 232. As Williams commented, *'they were prepared to offer some kind of self-regulatory structure which would not ... impinge upon their autonomy but at the same time would provide sufficient public reassurance'* (I: 9).

The Academic Audit Unit (AAU) was independent of individual institutions, but owned and managed by the universities and funded by the institutions themselves. Its double remit to examine both 'structures and mechanisms' for the quality assurance of their programmes and 'the maintenance and enhancement of their academic standards' (CVCP, 1992: 5) introduced the concept of external audit of universities, considered by most academics to be highly controversial, but its method of peer review was deemed preferable to a yet more distasteful intrusion by a government agency. The AAU carried out an initial series of 67 audits of the existing universities between 1990 and 1991 before being subsumed into the Audit Division of the newly formed Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) in 1992 which continued to audit institutions. The audit reports produced by the AAU were recognised to be useful as a means of encouraging self-reflection by universities which

could lead to improvement of their quality assurance systems. On the other hand, while the reports made ‘suggestions for improvement’ of quality assurance mechanisms, they made no judgements about the quality of teaching.

However, the AAU did extend both the principle and practice of audit by academic peers into the traditional university sector before the merger with the polytechnics and colleges under the 1992 Act. Arguably, this was the thin end of the wedge which weakened the CVCP’s potential to lead effective resistance against the national quality assurance structures from 1992 onwards. Indeed by 1990 Tasker and Packham (1990: 190) were already criticising academics for their failure to ‘assert strongly and publicly their function of intellectual and moral leadership within society’.

5.4.2 AAU Director’s Report, 1992

In January 1992, the CVCP published ‘the first annual report’ by Peter Williams, then Director of the AAU, covering the experience of five pilot audits and eight further audits undertaken between the establishment of the Unit in October 1990 and December 1991. The major message drawn from these audits was that significant attention in universities was now being devoted to the formal requirements of quality assurance, ‘leading to a rapid remodelling of policies and procedures’ (CVCP, 1992: 19). Though a small sample, this report was nevertheless an important record of the first systematic attempt to map the existing quality assurance arrangements in UK universities and offered an opportunity to express some ‘tentative views on the areas of current strengths and weaknesses across the system’ (CVCP, 1992: 19).

While admitting that it was premature to draw firm conclusions, the report gave examples of some beneficial changes apparently resulting from the introduction of quality assurance systems. Academic staff had a growing awareness of the potential of audit ‘as an aid to the enhancement of quality’ (CVCP, 1992: 20). Documentation was being revised and more explicit course approval, monitoring and evaluation processes were being implemented. On the other hand, ways of receiving feedback from students and other stakeholders such as employers required improvement.

In terms of teaching and learning, some major issues were raised by these early audits. For example, some academics were apparently still relying greatly on ‘chalk and talk’ (CVCP, 1992: 23) rather than concentrating on ‘curriculum development or innovative teaching

methods'. The most critical audit findings cited by Williams related to staff development and training, particularly where some auditors had encountered a 'common attitude' among academics that 'university teaching is not really something that can be taught, but occurs principally as a result of a form of osmotic transfer of knowledge and wisdom between teacher and student' (CVCP, 1992: 24). The 'intense and concentrated endeavour' involved in preparation for and involvement in the audit visits were already seen by many academics 'as a waste of valuable time and hence deeply resented' (CVCP, 1992: 31).

It was the Unit's policy to avoid an overly interventionist or critical approach. The auditors were all practising academics selected from nominations by vice-chancellors (CVCP, 1992: 6) thus conforming to the well-accepted academic practice of peer review, and the audit did not entail inspection of teaching (CVCP, 1992: 9). The AAU consciously avoided 'stridently critical language,' which would be likely to antagonise universities and make their staff 'less responsive to the principles of quality assurance' (CVCP, 1992: 15).

Williams strongly argued that:

'the most valuable outcome of academic audit is the development of a professional culture in which the continuous improvement of quality is accepted as an essential institutional goal, and is accepted willingly by all those concerned with a university's educational function. This is more likely to be achieved by persuasion than by conflict' (CVCP, 1992: 15).

Though accepting that universities could not escape the demands of external scrutiny indefinitely, the CVCP had hoped this voluntary initiative would be sufficient to satisfy the government while at the same time being unthreatening enough to encourage co-operation by its members. However, it was soon clear that this 'pre-emptive tactic' to avoid the imposition of external inspection had failed to stave off the introduction of quality assessment by the Funding Councils (Coopers, 1993: 10). Nevertheless, this report was an important document in the history of quality assurance as only a few months later, when the work of the AAU was taken over by the newly incorporated HEQC, this methodology became the blueprint for the much enlarged national audit programme.

5.5 1991 White Paper, Higher Education: A New Framework

5.5.1 A combined higher education sector

In May 1991 Kenneth Clarke, the newly appointed Secretary of State for Education in John Major's Government, introduced another White Paper (DES, 1991) which created the

legislative framework necessary to implement the structural, financial and administrative arrangements established in the 1988 Act. Its radical proposals were to create a greatly enlarged higher education sector by combining the existing universities with the polytechnics and colleges from the so-called ‘public sector’ and to establish Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Wales and Scotland thus establishing a joint funding structure. The structural change would also result in abolition of the CNA.

The White Paper provided little detail about how these changes (particularly financial) would work in practice. On the other hand, a separate chapter occupying over 25% of the document was devoted to ‘Quality Assurance in Teaching’, which indicated the priority accorded by the government to this topic. While reiterating the mantra that individual universities had ‘prime responsibility’ for maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, section 58 reminded them that they must nevertheless demonstrate ‘proper accountability’ for the substantial public funds invested in them. The juxtaposition of these key concepts foreshadowed the tensions between attempts to use quality assurance systems as an instrument of both accountability and improvement which this study will identify as one of the main discourses of the quality debate.

5.5.2 Definitions of quality

Although there was no comprehensive definition of ‘quality’ itself, section 60 listed several functions of quality control which would be expected to feature in the new regulatory system, including quality audit, approval of courses, accreditation, and quality assessment (see Table 3.5).

From his experience as a civil servant during the implementation of the corresponding legislation in Scotland, Kelly commented on the importance in the history of quality assurance of this section of the White Paper which he considered ‘*as good a succinct statement as you’re ever going to get because until then it had not been defined like that and everything that’s happened since has actually just clarified or developed that*’ (I: 3).

5.5.3 Quality control, audit and assessment

Without further supporting evidence, section 67 of the White Paper claimed the authority of ‘a common view throughout higher education on the need for externally provided reassurance that the quality control mechanisms within institutions are adequate’. Scott (1989: 12) had previously observed that peer review, the universities’ traditional barometer of academic quality, was ‘widely seen as too feeble an instrument’ to fulfil its role under the political and economic pressures of the reformed sector so new regulatory mechanisms were required.

Quality audit, ‘the process of ensuring that the quality control arrangements are satisfactory’ (HEQC 1994: 62), was to be the task of a new organisation with a remit to take over the monitoring of institutional quality systems from the AAU and a broader responsibility for ‘quality support and enhancement’ (Brown, 2004: 2). In introducing arrangements for quality assessment, the 1991 White Paper detailed a number of principles which would reinforce government control. Quality assessment of individual subjects should be made on the basis of ‘quantifiable outcomes’ to include ‘performance indicators and calculations of value added’. New ‘quality units’ within the Funding Councils would be responsible for assessing a range of activities ‘on the basis of direct observation of what is provided’ including ‘the quality of teaching and learning, its management and organisation, accommodation and equipment’ (DES, 1991: 81).

This dual process was the result of complex negotiations attempting to reconcile the varied interests involved in the operation of the new merged university sector. The proposals for the new audit organisation to be owned and managed by the institutions themselves, thus incorporating the principle of self-regulation, emerged from discussions between the pre- and post-92 universities represented by the CVCP and the Committee of Polytechnic Directors (Shattock, 2012). However, at the same time as plans for the establishment of the HEQC were going ahead with the agreement of the DES, the 1992 legislation was giving statutory responsibility to the newly created Funding Councils for external quality assessment. It did not take much insight to predict future conflict between these two organisations. As even the founding Circular 3/93 admitted, ‘the dangers of overlap between quality assessment and quality audit and possible duplication of institutional effort are recognised’ (HEFCE, 1993: 69).

5.5.4 Quality assessment ‘to inform funding’

Furthermore, assessments of quality were intended to inform the decisions of the new Funding Councils. The idea that the level of funding for public agencies should depend on their performance had first been applied in 1985 to the Research Assessment Exercise when large amounts of funding were awarded to institutions according to the quality of their research. One of the explicit aims of the introduction of quality assessment in the White Paper of 1991 was to extend this principle to teaching. ‘The Government considers it important that assessment of quality should continue to inform the decisions of the new Funding Councils’ (DES, 1991: 79). For the avoidance of doubt, the Secretary of State for Education’s letter of guidance to HEFCE directed that the Council would need ‘in particular, to ensure that the outcomes of assessment visits are in a form which can be used to inform funding allocations’ (HEFCE, 1993, Annex A).

It was unusual for a White Paper to contain this level of detail: indeed, Booth and Roper (1992: 227) commented that ‘never before has a British government White Paper on higher education had so much to say about quality’. As confirmed by Kelly speaking from personal experience, it appeared that the government, anticipating resistance on the part of the universities, was adopting this level of prescription in order to ensure that its policies were carried out: *‘normally you legislate as to ends and then you leave it to guidance and statutory instruments and all the paraphernalia’*. In this case, however, *‘the Major government had inherited an interventionist outlook from Thatcher’*. The explanation for legislating for quality in this way *‘was the Thatcherite one: well if we didn’t put it in the Act, they wouldn’t do it, they would wriggle off the hook’* (I: 3). The terms of the White Paper which became law in 1992 left no doubt that ‘the traditional autonomy of universities with regard to teaching [was] being assailed’ (Bryman and Cantor, 1992: 87).

5.6 The roots of discord

5.6.1 A rift between Whitehall and the universities

The support of civil servants for the introduction of formal quality assurance procedures was in keeping with the government’s ideological commitment to accountability of public services in general. Many of them welcomed the introduction of quality assurance in the 1992 Act both as a way of strengthening what they viewed as weak regulatory systems in

the pre-92 universities and as a means of allaying anxiety about the maintenance of standards in the post-92 universities once the former regulatory systems of the CNAA and HMI had been abolished. As Shattock plausibly suggested (2012: 200) ‘part of the unspoken price for the merger of the sectors was the creation of some new quality mechanism’. There was certainly a perception among some academics in the pre-92 universities, forcefully expressed by Griffith (1989: 61) that the decision to introduce the elaborate quality assurance arrangements resulted from the ‘dangerous arrogance of policy makers in the DES’ who believed that the higher education sector needed to be brought to heel. This interpretation was supported by Williams (I: 9) who attributed to civil servants ‘*a deep deep suspicion of the combination of the level of freedom of action the universities had and the level of public funding that was going in*’. Interviewee 6, from his own experience, recalled that civil servants’ criticisms of the very high costs of higher education had motivated them to support a firmer government line with the ‘old’ universities, as well as promoting the idea that the post-92 universities might still need some academic oversight following the abolition of the CNAA. Quality assurance would fulfil both requirements.

Although section 78 of the White Paper clearly specified that the arrangements for assessment were intended to be a matter for the Funding Councils themselves, section 83 also announced that the new quality assessment units would be ‘subject to guidance from the Secretaries of State’. Ironically the post-92 universities, believing they had gained independence from the former centralised structure, were now to be subjected to new forms of control which were also to be imposed on the previously much more autonomous ‘old’ universities. As Kelly pointed out, the implementation of quality assurance needed to be carefully handled in both sectors in order to achieve co-operation: ‘*the key thing for us was that it would plug the gaps that abolition of the CNAA and its processes would leave, but not so discountenance the older universities that they would not participate. It was a balancing act*’ (I: 3). However, as Interviewee 10 observed, the reform process created a paradoxical situation in that ‘*the government was pushing the universities to introduce collective regulation in the ‘old’ universities at the same time as those arrangements were being decentralised and some would say weakened within the public sector*’ (I: 10). These provisions which left no doubt that the government intended to impose overall control thus risked antagonising both the pre- and the post-92 universities at a stroke.

There were potential difficulties of establishing joint quality systems for the very different cultures of the ‘old’ universities on one side and the polytechnics and colleges on the other

side of the binary line. The former had largely relied on external examination by academic peers for the maintenance of teaching standards while the latter were familiar with long-established systems of validation, accreditation and inspection within the CNAA/HMI structure. Booth and Roper (1992: 233) anticipated a clash between the ‘grudging and fatalistic attitude still perceptible in the universities’ and the ‘fuller internalisation of both quality control and quality assurance processes in the polytechnics and colleges’. These different reactions were also observed by Interviewee 2 who commented that for staff in pre-92 universities quality assurance seemed ‘*a completely alien and unnecessary thing*’, whereas ‘*staff in CNAA institutions ... would have been much more at home with some degree of external supervision and examination and so forth*’ (I: 2).

5.6.2 Conflicts of interest

As a representative group for the universities, the CVCP assumed a more important advocacy role once the protection of UGC had been abolished in the 1988 Act and had tried unsuccessfully to retain control over academic issues, including quality, through the pre-emptive initiatives of the Reynolds and Jarratt committees and the establishment of the Academic Audit Unit. After 1992, an emerging dilemma for the CVCP was how far it could maintain its role of representing autonomous institutions while also cooperating with HEFCE’s determination to enforce unwelcome regulatory policies. Particular doubts were expressed by the universities about the Funding Councils’ combined responsibilities for the funding of higher education and the assessment of its quality. In the *THES* of 22 January 1993, Knight expressed the misgivings of many senior academics about this link: ‘the one place judgements about quality should never be is in the hands of the funders. It gives them control over body and soul ... [it constitutes] a fundamental threat to academic freedom’.

The allocation of the audit and assessment functions to two separate bodies with parallel functions and different accountabilities was also likely to become problematic. The complexity of the dual structure and the balance of power was a recipe for confusion and conflict within the organisations themselves while the overlaps and duplications in the review activities of the HEQC and the Funding Councils would inevitably cause resentment in the universities.

5.6.3 Competition

Another sensitive issue was the proposed requirement that the assessment units would publish information for potential students and employers about ‘the actual and relative quality of institutions and of the courses they provide’ (DES, 1991: 84). Apart from the practical difficulties of this, Bryman and Cantor (1992: 87) foresaw the development of a ‘kind of *Which?* approach to courses’, which would introduce a competitive marketing element likely to be strongly resisted by academics.

5.6.4 Documentary demands

Table 3.8 on page 60 lists the range of statistical and academic documentation required to accompany the university self-assessment documents (C3/93: 21-22).

Thinking ahead to the practical effects of the proposed changes on their working lives, academics in the pre-92 universities were quick to anticipate the increased bureaucratic workload which would inevitably result from the documentary demands of the new quality assurance systems. Remembering the amount of work involved in setting up the new procedures, Interviewee 2 also commented that close reading of the clumsily-phrased relevant section in the 1992 Act⁴ raised the question of whether this was ever intended: *‘I’ve always wondered to what extent the people who drew up the act actually meant it to be taken to that degree of detail’*. This idea was supported by Wagner (1993: 284). Kelly reflected that the compulsion to provide so much documentation might have been self-inflicted as an insurance policy by the universities: *‘It was the person looking over the department’s shoulder and the department head who insisted on all this massive documentation’* (I: 3). Nevertheless, he also foresaw the burden of operating such cumbersome systems: *‘You were going to have a quality assessment report for every significant area of provision in every university or HEI and it was going to be repeated. You were going to do it once and then you were going to come back and you were going to do it again. Now that meant that we as practical civil servants were already saying before the universities had started moaning about the burden, “How long before you’ve got full coverage and how up-to-date is the full coverage once achieved?”’* (I: 3).

⁴ The 1992 FHEA allocated responsibility to the Funding Councils to ‘secure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education provided in institutions for whose activities they provide, or are considering support.’

5.6.5 A paradox for quality: *'more students with no more money'*

The second chapter of the White Paper entitled 'Teaching' (DES, 1991) opened with a claim (based on no stated evidence) that quality had been 'enhanced' during the period 1985-90 when student numbers had increased by over 20% against a relative drop in the unit of resource. There was to be no let up in the target for expansion and the challenge for higher education stated in section 19 was to continue to expand 'efficiently' in order to cater for a projected increase of approaching one half by the year 2000, while maintaining quality. By 1991, the CVCP was protesting that 'lack of money [was] hampering expansion and threatening quality' (CVCP, 1991: 11), with visible signs of deteriorating buildings, overcrowded classrooms, and understocked libraries. They issued a stark challenge to the government's link between quality and efficiency: if efficiency merely meant cost cutting, beyond a certain point, quality inevitably would suffer and 'without new investment a choice [would] have to be made between quality and expansion (CVCP, 1991: 12). In his commentary on the 1991 White Paper, Trow (1992) was incredulous that the extended chapter on Quality Assurance failed to provide any detail about capital investment in such facilities as laboratories, libraries and equipment which were crucial to the achievement of high quality teaching.

The inadequacy of the funds being made available for the continued expansion of higher education was one of the major concerns expressed in the House of Lords debate on the second reading of the Further and Higher Education Bill (21 November 1991). Baroness Blackstone, then opposition spokesperson for Higher Education, deplored the fact that 'every year higher education is squeezed harder,' thus threatening the universities' ability to deliver the government's intended reforms. Twenty years later when interviewed for this study, she attributed responsibility to Kenneth Baker (Secretary of State for Education from 1986-89) who had '*packed in very large additional numbers but had not provided the funding to go with it. It was driving down the unit of resource by expansion with no additional funding...: how could you maintain quality if you were teaching more students with no more money?*' (I. 7). The paradox arising from these entrenched positions manifested itself in a long-running conflict between the government and the higher education sector.

5.7 *Foundations for the future*

The reforms introduced in the 1988 and 1992 Higher Education Acts thus radically changed the ethos, structure and funding arrangements of UK higher education and, though political pronouncements were commonly prefaced with rhetoric about respecting university autonomy, the reforms were designed to do just the opposite.

The new framework for higher education based on principles of efficiency, effectiveness and value for money contained features of the 'New Public Management' model then being promoted by government in the rest of the public sector. With the abolition of the UGC under the 1988 Education Reform Act, the universities lost the support of an organisation which had traditionally acted as a 'buffer' in their financial dialogue with the government. The new Higher Education Funding Councils had responsibility to allocate public funding for the universities and to make provision for assessment of the quality of the education they provided. Complex mechanisms would be introduced to assess the quality of research and teaching upon which the levels of funding would depend.

In an epilogue to his book, Russell (1993: 106) identified the measures in the 1992 Act as 'a further significant erosion of academic freedom' with the limits of academics' professional autonomy 'being whittled away to nothing'. In policy terms, academics were anxious that quality assurance systems could be used as instruments of state control while on a practical level, the proposed methods quickly gave rise to questions, particularly about the double burden of audit and assessment which would inevitably lead to increased workload.

In the ensuing power struggle, public exchanges between the universities and the government became increasingly hostile. While academic leaders voiced their opposition to the increase of government control, the exasperation of politicians at their perceived resistance was also forcefully expressed, as in an outburst by the Under-Secretary of State Robert Jackson quoted in the *THES* of 17 June 1988: 'Academics are failing to understand the challenge to their assumptions posed by Government policies on higher education. They should stop cowering in the secret garden of knowledge and get to grips with the real world'. These positions became more polarised with the passing of the 1992 Act and many of these tensions would surface in the debates about quality over the ensuing decade.

CHAPTER 6: THE QUALITY INDUSTRY

'Quality has become an industry, a technology in its own right' (Interviewee 10).

6.1 Introduction

One of the most striking aspects of the introduction of quality assurance in the reformed UK higher education sector was the enormous amount of new activity it generated, not just in the setting up phase but through the succeeding decade. The result was that quality assurance soon became thought of as an 'industry', and it was notable that three out of the ten interviewees in this study spontaneously used this term. As time went on, it became apparent that there were other parallels between the attitudes and practices of industry and commerce and the introduction of quality assurance into higher education. These dimensions are explored in this chapter.

6.2 The quality 'industry'

6.2.1 New structures and systems

As a result of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) parallel systems of audit by the Higher Education Quality Council and subject assessment by the Funding Councils were introduced simultaneously into UK higher education. Each of these new public bodies required its own systems of governance and management to undertake these tasks, while the universities in their turn had to set up corresponding systems and prepare their staff to respond to their new demands.

HEFCE's preparation for the first round of assessments entailed the major task of recruiting and training over 400 subject specialist assessors for the first eight subject areas to be assessed (HEFCE M2/94, Para. 11.11) and in addition to offering training, the Funding Councils and the HEQC produced special guidelines for their assessors and auditors. Likewise for the universities, especially in the days before universal access to computers, preparation for an audit or an assessment was a considerable undertaking entailing a great deal of hard work in assembling (and sometimes in the pre-92 universities compiling from scratch) the necessary documentation, as well as the statistical information requested. Assessment visits then included a three-day programme of meetings between assessors, staff and students, as well as observation of 'a full range of teaching and learning activities' (HEFCE M2/94, Para. 11.12) followed by the writing, discussion and

publication of reports and for the universities, complying with any recommendations for action. In parallel, the HEQC took over the role of monitoring the universities' quality audit systems from the former AAU.

HEFCE issued an important guidance document (C3/93) setting out in detail the purposes and methods for the assessment of quality which incorporated a number of the key principles and policies expressed in the 1987 and 1991 White Papers. The duty to 'inform funding and reward excellence', (M2/94 para. 11.6) was accompanied by a threat that funding would be removed from substandard provision. It also made clear that assessment of teaching quality was to be made by reference to the universities' own stated objectives, enshrining the principle of diversity in UK higher education.

Table 6.1: The Purposes of Quality Assessment (HEFCE C93: 3.1)

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure that all education for which the HEFCE provides funding is of satisfactory quality or better • To ensure speedy rectification of unsatisfactory quality • To encourage improvements in the quality of education through the publication of assessment reports and an annual report • To inform funding and reward excellence |
|---|

The circular C3/93 described HEFCE's approach to assessment by subject area 'within the context of an institution's own aims and objectives' and introduced three assessment categories, 'excellent', 'satisfactory' and 'unsatisfactory' (see Table 3.9). It then explained elements of the quality assessment method, including institutional self-assessment (to contain copious amounts of statistical data), the recruitment and training of the assessors and the conduct of assessment visits which would only be made to institutions which had established a *prima facie* case for excellence, or where there were grounds for concern that quality might be 'at risk' (HEFCE M2/94, 11.12).

The purposes of quality assurance did not remain stable for long. Comparison between Circulars 3/93 and 39/94 the following year reveals how core purposes were modified in the light of 'more recent statements of Government expectations', in this case to comply with a speech by the Secretary of State, John Patten, which had emphasised 'accountability for public funds, a link with funding to enhance quality, providing accessible public information, and sharing and publicising best practice' (HEFCE C39/94, para. 22.d). The financial priorities of securing value from public investment and linking quality

assessments with funding had been elevated to the top of the list, the idea of rewarding excellence had been lost with the abolition of the ‘excellent’ grade, and aims to share best practice and provide accessible public information had been added.

6.2.2 The volume of work

Early commentaries on quality audit and assessment in England (Coopers, 1993; CHES, 1994) detailed the quality assurance programmes implemented and emphasised the volume of work undertaken. By the end of 1993, HEFCE had carried out 288 subject assessments in 128 institutions, (CHES, 1994: 17) while the Academic Audit Unit of the CVCP and its successor, the HEQC’s Division of Quality Audit, had produced 69 academic audit reports by April 1994 (*Learning from Audit 1*, 1994: vi). The review teams commented on the considerable achievements by HEFCE and the HEQC in getting the audit and assessment processes up and running so soon, particularly during a time of great upheaval within the sector. By any standard this represented an impressive response to government demands for ‘efficiency’ throughout the higher education sector. On the other hand predictions about the amount of work in preparing for and participating in the quality assurance processes were starting to be fulfilled. Interviewee 2 who had himself been involved in preparing his department for an assessment visit recalled that quality assurance ‘*started being prominent in universities in the 90s in a form that required more work than anything we’d done before or since*’ (I: 2). Continuing experience of the inexorable cycles of the twin processes of audit and assessment greatly increased the strain.

6.2.3 Careers in quality

Maintaining the systems of assessment and audit was a demanding and costly process. Apart from employing the necessary staff in their own organisations, both the Funding Councils and the HEQC had to recruit, train and pay large numbers of assessors and auditors. An advertisement placed by the HEQC in the *THES* of 26 January 1994 looked for auditors able to ‘commit themselves to undertaking up to ten audits in three years, each audit involving between 12 and 15 days’ with a fee of £900 per audit being paid. Auditors would be expected to fit a demanding person specification and would ‘normally’ be senior members of an institution’s academic or administrative staff, though might also be individuals ‘with appropriate experience from outside higher education’. (*THES*, 26 January 1994). Three reviews (Coopers, 1993, CHES, 1994 and Johnstone *et al.*, 1995) all mentioned the personal benefits gained by academics who participated as assessors in these

processes. Having in-house staff who understood the quality assurance processes and language was also an effective way of embedding the systems within the universities. Despite these potential benefits, however, it was a significant new commitment for the universities to release senior members of staff to undertake these demanding extra commitments during the academic year to operate the quality assurance system.

It was quickly realised that compliance with quality assurance requirements was not a one-off effort but a permanent and expanding addition to the work of university staff throughout the UK. Williams, who had moved to the HEQC, commented on '*the rise of the quality industry in institutions, a new branch of administration*' (I: 9). Both academics and administrators became involved in the production of information for audits and assessments, with 'quality assurance officers' being appointed at department level to co-ordinate the process and pass the information to specially appointed staff in central quality assurance units. Overall responsibility for quality assurance was usually given to a senior academic at vice-principal level, indicating the importance accorded to the role. These new structures offered opportunities of internal promotion for staff and external liaison with government agencies and other academic bodies in the rapidly developing world of quality assurance. John Brennan later recalled a conversation in the mid-1990s with a university administrator who described his change in status since the advent of teaching quality assessment (TQA). 'Since TQA had arrived, he could not walk across the campus without being approached by academics seeking advice and information connected with forthcoming TQA events. Prior to TQA he had been invisible around the institution. After it, he was famous' (Brennan, 2012: 7).

Interviewee 2, who had devoted a great deal of time to the development of quality assurance both within his university and externally, linked the general expansion of quality assurance and its associated bureaucracy with an increased central awareness of the importance of teaching. This led in time to the growth of such posts as 'Vice-Principal for Learning and Teaching' and the creation in some universities of personal chairs for learning and teaching. In his words, '*That may be just a bureaucratic thing but it shows a greater degree of central thinking about it*' (I. 2). While the increased focus on teaching was welcomed by many as one of the benefits of quality assurance (see chapter 12), there were some reservations about this kind of promotion. Williams commented that '*there is a question about why you should be a professor because you've inflicted quality assurance on your colleagues*' and warned of the danger that '*quality assurance can become an end rather than a means*' (I. 9).

6.2.4 Communicating quality

Another aspect of the quality ‘industry’ was the proliferation of communication between the universities and both the Funding Councils and HEQC as the systems of assessment and audit developed. In an effort to gain support from the sector, the Chief Executive of HEFCE, Professor Graeme Davies, emphasised the Council’s commitment to open communication: ‘The Council has adopted a policy of transparency within which it seeks to provide institutions in the sector with the maximum amount of information and data relevant to its policies and its decisions’ (HEFCE M2/94, para. 15.1). The archives of HEFCE chronicle the history of quality assurance in circulars, reports, forward plans and consultation papers, and personal contact between universities and the staff of HEFCE was also important (HEFCE M2/94).

Communication with the public, including publication of assessment and audit reports, was another major commitment for both HEFCE and the HEQC – an important aspect of the accountability of public bodies in the new ‘audit culture’. In accordance with the Secretary of State’s initial Letter of Guidance to the HEFCE Chairman (quoted in the *Assessors’ Handbook*, 1993, para. 3) Quality Assessment Reports on individual subjects produced by HEFCE were published from the outset and made available from the Council at a cost of £2, though perhaps unsurprisingly the main demand for these reports came from within the higher education sector rather than from the public (CHES, 1994, para. 11.9). From the universities’ point of view handling this volume of external communication with the Funding Councils and the HEQC became another demand on the time of staff in the quality units established in the universities.

It is notable that halfway through its second year, the HEQC Secretariat Division felt it necessary to advertise in the *THES* for a ‘Head of Communications’, at a salary of between £25,000 and £35,000 per annum, who would be expected ‘to play a vital role in the development of the organisation’, including the creation of an ‘effective communications Strategy’. An interesting reflection on the new priorities was that while applicants were asked for ‘at least 5 years experience of working in the field of communications...’ knowledge of higher education was described merely as ‘an advantage’ (*THES*, December 1993).

In the early days of quality assurance, the requirement to publish information in the form of subject assessment reports had been a sensitive issue for the universities. As the former

Chief Executive of HEFCE commented, '*the government wanted these subject by subject reports ... and the institutions were very unhappy about that because it affected their recruitment. And because essentially it's a bit like buying a used car, some of them would say "if it gets a really great review you'll sell lots of them but if it's a Trabant nobody wants to go there"*' (I: 1). The introduction of numerical scoring into the TQA process from 1995 and the publication of league tables swiftly convinced the universities of the need to persuade prospective students of the high quality of what they were offering and led to the growth of the marketing function in institutions. The varying impacts of competition on universities, staff and students have become a recurring theme in this thesis.

Though the CVCP's Academic Audit Unit had initially been more reticent about publishing its reports, the Board of its successor body, the HEQC, decided at its first meeting in July 1992 that its audit reports should also be published (Brown, 2004: 55).

6.3 The bandwagon

6.3.1 The demands of accountability

One important element of the accountability of public bodies in the new 'audit culture' was the maintenance of transparency through subjecting quality assurance activities to evaluation and review. A *Joint Statement on Quality* issued by the HEQC and HEFCE in January 1994 indicated compliance with this commitment: both organisations were 'continually searching for ways in which the processes for which they are responsible can be made more effective in achieving their objectives. Both Councils conduct periodic evaluations' (HEQC/HEFCE, M1/94, para. 32).

The task of evaluation brought another demanding dimension to the work of quality assurance. The HEQC had led the way with the report by the Director of the AAU in 1991 and subsequently focused on quality enhancement and the spreading of good practice, notably through its *Learning from Audit* series (HEQC, 1994 and 1996). In January 1994, the Chief Executive of HEFCE, Professor Graeme Davies, published an 'Overview' of the radical changes that had occurred in the UK Higher Education sector since the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, in which Section 11, under the aspirational title *The Pursuit of Quality*, contained a succinct factual account of the first year of HEFCE's operation and

the processes during the first phase of quality assessment. As predicted from the outset, the most striking feature of the assessment process was the sheer amount of work required to prepare for it. Though denying that it wished to be prescriptive about the contents of the self-assessment, HEFCE nevertheless specified a fairly demanding amount of data to be provided (M2/94, paras 11.9 and 11.10).

In accordance with public accountability, the HEQC and the Higher Education Funding Councils in England and Scotland also commissioned external reviews of their early activities. A review of audit from management consultants Coopers and Lybrand (1993) was followed by a review of assessment from the University of London Centre for Higher Education Studies (CHES) chaired by Ron Barnett (1994). Though some benefits were recognised, these both reported on some protests at the increased bureaucracy involved in the quality assurance processes and raised questions about the costs. These were the first in a succession of external reviews and evaluations of quality assurance in universities commissioned over the next turbulent period.

6.3.2 Consultancy and advice

The academics and organisations devoting themselves to this work at a cost to the public purse were among those gaining from public service managerialism (Pollitt, 1993: 134) and the quality assurance industry thus became a source of income for a new arrival on the higher education scene whom Jenkins (1995: 153) referred to as ‘that high priest of Thatcherism-in-government, the management consultant’.

The bewilderment of many academics at the increasing complexity of the quality assurance requirements provided opportunities for others to offer advice. For example, the Open University was quick to set up a ‘Quality Support Centre’ (QSC) as ‘an independent source of information and advice on quality assurance and assessment in higher education’ (QSC, 1993: 12). The QSC also carried out research and, from October 1992, continued publication of *The Digest* (previously produced by the research and information service of the CNAA) which appeared three times a year and contained ‘concise information on all important publications and other significant developments which have a bearing on the quality of higher education both in the UK and internationally’ (QSC, 1993: 12). The issue produced in Winter 1993 reported in detail on the progress being made in constructing new organisations and arrangements for quality assurance and a special supplement contained a

background paper on quality management and quality assurance in European higher education.

6.3.3 Academic publishing and research

With quality assurance impinging dramatically on the working lives of academics, it was not surprising that they soon began to write about it. The HEQC's *Guidelines on Quality Assurance* (1994) already contained a long list of publications and the catalogues of educational publishers started to include sections on quality. As mentioned in chapter 2, the 1990s saw a burgeoning of literature devoted to the complex issues surrounding quality with journals such as *Quality in Higher Education*, *Quality Assurance in Education*, *Total Quality Management* and others becoming a fertile field for research and commentary, thus providing further opportunities for academics under pressure to produce publications.

6.4 Parallels with industry

6.4.1 Industrial origins of quality assurance

The expression the 'quality industry' was aptly coined to denote the proliferation of activity and hard work involved in implementing quality assurance systems in higher education but it also had wider connotations. The principles and techniques of quality assurance originally arose in an industrial manufacturing setting before being applied to service industries and then extended to a range of public services during the 1980s in keeping with the Conservative government's policy. Morley (2003) traced the origins of quality assurance to the Japanese car industry, especially as exemplified in the techniques of TQM with its emphasis on zero defects and continuous improvement.

In this context Tasker and Packham (1994) linked the initial moves by the CVCP to introduce 'quality audit' for universities with the principles of Total Quality Management. They had strong reservations about the application of such techniques to higher education, commenting that the AAU 'was transplanting the procedures and jargon of "quality assurance" from an industrial context where they may be appropriate, to an academic context where they are not' (Tasker and Packham, 1994: 156). In their view, the introduction of commercial terminology into an academic context could be part of a deliberate attempt by university management to change the culture. 'Those who wish to change attitudes will often seek to encourage particular forms of language and

characteristic vocabulary, recognising that those who habitually speak in a particular way will often come to think in that way' (Tasker and Packham, 1994: 157). Holmes (1993: 6) recognised a change of culture accompanied by this kind of 'techno-speak' associated with the industrial origins of quality assurance: 'techniques such as TQM and BS 5750/ISO 9000, and customer care are ... becoming the buzz words of the academic boards of the 1990s'. Hart (1997: 305-6) wrote of evangelical 'industrialists and businessmen preaching "total quality" to spread the gospel' but it was immediately clear to most academics that the industrial jargon of these borrowed concepts was alien to the world of teaching and learning. Bell (1992) and Alderman (1996) among many others noted the inappropriateness of such importations from the world of industry to assess the complex processes of teaching and learning. Williams was against reducing the education of students to '*the widget creation*' (I: 9) and Interviewee 2 resented the use of the borrowed term 'quality assurance' in an educational context.

6.4.2 Graduates for industry

Since the 1980s the prosperity of universities had begun to depend on collaboration with industry and commerce, and quality became a crucial issue in the competition to earn funding for research and to attract students to their courses. Figures for degree classifications and first job destinations were included among the package of statistics published as indicators of quality (C3/93). Some of Thatcher's ministers believed that one way of imposing control on higher education would be to bring the universities 'closer to the world of business' which they saw in 'a golden haze', though few of them had any personal experience of it (Jenkins, 1995: 143). The political credo that the purpose of higher education was to produce graduates with appropriate knowledge and skills to contribute to the economy was not confined to the UK government. A European Commission document of 1991 had unequivocally summed up the expectations of higher education in relation to employment:

'Higher education has a vital role to play in providing a supply-led boost for economic development and in equipping all members of the labour force and young people with the new skills needed to meet the rapidly changing demands of European enterprise' (European Commission, 1991, *Memorandum on Higher Education*, para 12: 4).

Commenting on the merger of the 'old' universities with the polytechnics and colleges under the 1992 Act, Tasker and Packham (1994: 159) argued that the government might have directly intervened to promote an 'enterprise culture' in order to counterbalance the

academic values which they saw as ‘inimical to the economic well-being of the country’. This instrumentalist view of education was directly opposed to many of the traditional values of universities and such criticism was not calculated to encourage already demoralised academics. Griffith (1989: 52) eloquently defended his conviction that ‘the purpose of education [was] primarily to broaden the imagination, to develop the skills, to enlarge the understanding of the individual’. He took issue with ‘the urgent necessity for universities and polytechnics to meet the needs of industry and commerce’ and ridiculed the ‘nonsensical’ charge that UK universities were not meeting the needs of industry (Griffith, 1989: 60). Who else, he asked, had hitherto been educating and training graduates across all professional disciplines? Alderman (1996: 178) believed that this pressure on universities to operate ‘as part of the national wealth-creating process’ was now excessive. He drew attention to some recurring themes in the published reports of the 1993-94 round of HEFCE subject assessments which indicated the strong industrial influence. He noted

‘the need to relate curricula and teaching to the future employment needs of students, the desirability of academics forging strong links with employers, ... above all, the belief that the prime responsibility of higher-education institutions is to produce the graduates needed by industry’ (Alderman, 1966: 188).

The reaction of universities was neatly summed up by Interviewee 6: *‘The Treasury was thinking it was a perfectly good idea to put £60 million into the then Manpower Services Commission for the Enterprise in Higher Education programme to stimulate change in the HE curriculum and learning styles, and to develop entrepreneurial skills. This completely shocked universities’* (I: 6). In such ways as these, an industrial culture was infiltrating teaching and learning to an unprecedented extent.

6.4.3 Assessment of quality

Interviewees reflected on the many difficulties of establishing meaningful methods for assessing higher education. Interviewee 6, a former civil servant with experience in developing performance indicators for education warned of the complexities: *post-92 universities appear to have less good quality outcomes. Why? Because they take less good students’*. He therefore reflected that *‘to judge a university or to judge a department, I suppose you need to look at the value added’* (I: 6). This would of course mean attempting to define starting points which would in turn entail taking account of the social

backgrounds and previous educational opportunities of students, raising the increasingly important equalities agenda. There was a further problem in developing comparable measurements of quality for different subjects. While this might be relatively simple for scientific and technical subjects which lent themselves to quantifiable assessment, arts and humanities subjects presented different challenges. For example, *‘how do you do it in history... how do you make sure it’s rigorous? Once you’re outside a professional vocational course, an awful lot of time has been spent trying to define what it is, and I’m not sure that you can actually’* (I: 6). As the founding director of QAA Scotland, Sharp criticised the limitations of a mechanistic approach to quality assurance propounded by *‘people from a different world’* who *‘would like to see quality measured like you measure temperature and you’ve got a thermometer and you say, “Well today quality in higher education is 78 and that’s good”’* (I: 4).

6.4.4 Teaching Quality Assessment and numerical scoring

In theorising the impact of performativity on higher education, Harker (1995: 32) drew attention to Lyotard’s ideas about the rapid development of electronic communications *‘which [had] helped to transform the nature of knowledge and the transmission of acquired learning’* and at the same time enabled the production of statistics which allowed governments to monitor *‘the input-output equation’* in higher education. Development of technology enabling the measurement of performance had in turn led to increased demands for accountability in a cycle referred to by Lyotard as the *‘performativity principle’* and promoted *‘the production measurement approach to quality assurance’*. Harker emphasised the importance of this in fulfilling several of the aims of quality assurance in national higher education systems: publication of statistics about the *‘performance’* of institutions could contribute to accountability for the use of public funds while allowing comparison between universities and enabling students to make supposedly informed choices.

Numerical scoring had not been used in the first round of teaching quality assessments and Barnett, who conducted the first external review commissioned by HEFCE, had argued against it in the belief that the initial three-level grading system (unsatisfactory, satisfactory and excellent) was *‘relatively benign’* (CHES Report, 1994). However, the government was deaf to these concerns and persisted in its desire for quantifiable measures and, after a process of consultation with the sector, introduced numerical scoring from the 1995-96 assessment round onwards in England. Observation of classroom teaching, originally specified as an activity for assessment, was abandoned and systems were

adopted for the Teaching Quality Assessments to rate subject provision by departments on a four-point scale across six ‘core aspects’ (See Table 6.2 below) giving a maximum possible score of 24. This was intended to enable comparison between universities across the country.

Table 6.2: Aspects of provision for assessment from 1995, (HEFCE, C39/94)

Curriculum development, content and organisation
Teaching, learning and assessment
Student progression and achievement
Student support and guidance
Learning resources
Quality management and enhancement

HEFCE’s decision to ignore the resistance to the numerical scoring system subsequently led to many of the difficulties in the system. Cave, Hanney and Henkel (1995) provided an overview of the search for effective performance indicators for the quality of higher education, a challenge which had become even greater in the newly combined higher education sector after 1992. As Drennan (2001: 177) later pointed out, the fundamental difficulty was to establish criteria to measure the quality of teaching which would require ‘a definition of ‘excellence’ in teaching and some mechanisms to record and evaluate teaching performance and innovative developments’.

Lack of information was not the problem. Ramsden, chief executive of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (set up in 1993 for the purpose of compiling higher education statistics), wrote of the difficulty of explaining to members of the public that despite the mass of complex data collected, HESA was unable to supply ‘clear performance indicators and league tables’ (*THES*, 28 September 1998). In retrospect, Kinman and Jones (2003: 30) summed up the sector’s objection to the industrial approach which reduced teaching to ‘a technology of inputs and outputs, performance indicators and managerial styles. We are now in an industry – one where “customers” are its products!’.

6.4.5 The 'corporate university'

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the Jarratt report of 1985 had recommended making universities more 'corporate' with a greater emphasis on finance and planning and achieving links with industry and commerce. Subsequent legislation had confirmed this direction of travel. In the eyes of government higher education was thus equated with a production process and the emphasis in this commercial model was on delivering value for money through 'cost-effective teaching, scholarship and research of high quality' (HEFCE M2/94, para. 5.3). To compensate for the cuts in central funding, universities were also expected to develop an entrepreneurial approach, with a new onus on academics to seek external funding, particularly for research, often through establishing partnerships with industry which favoured research in scientific and medical disciplines. Dearlove (1997: 60) pointed out that in 1995, higher education's total income was about £10 billion but only 44% was provided by the Funding Councils. 'Universities have been forced to become businesses, marketing themselves and their assets, whilst exporting education and competing in the world-wide higher education industry'. Some concerns were raised about the universities' increasing dependence on funding from industry to increase their income, (Tasker and Packham (1990)).

6.4.6 Managerialism in universities

The crusade for efficient management in universities led to moves from the traditional university structures towards more centralised management of a range of functions including quality assurance, with a corresponding increase in senior non-academic posts. As universities came to resemble businesses, vice-chancellors were expected to assume many of the responsibilities normally carried out by chief-executives of major companies, not least that of leading the university senior management team. For example, Johnson (1994: 376) cited an advertisement for a vice-chancellor in *The Times*, 5 May, 1994 which specified 'a leader skilled in policy development and strategic planning' possessing such qualifications as 'successful senior management experience' and 'outstanding communication skills'. Henkel (2000: 51) pointed out that 'managerial ability' had been identified in the Jarratt Report (1985) 'as the essential quality for leaders at all levels in the institution' and the traditional academic roles of deans and heads of department were extended by the demands of management and administration, including performance management of staff. A significant element in this 'intrusion of managerialism into the governance of universities' were the new structures put in place to implement quality

assurance systems (Harker, 1995: 37). In criticising this trend, Holmes (1993: 7) warned that the gap between the 'liberal and non-conformist tradition' of academics and the management style of industry and commerce made this approach very unlikely to succeed in universities.

6.4.7 The rise of administrators

The government's drive for efficiency in higher education depended on the introduction of more sophisticated information technology needed to satisfy 'the apparently insatiable appetite of the Universities Funding Council and other central bodies for information of one sort or another' (Bryman and Cantor, 1992: 88-89). Quality assurance was part of this trend as universities recruited staff qualified to handle the statistics and information required for its processes. Brown (2004: 89) commented on this extension in the power of administrators who thus became able, if they wished, to 'open the black box of academic decision making and see to it that academics could justify the procedures (or lack of them) that they had'.

While many academic staff were themselves involved in quality assurance procedures, pressures of time encouraged them to delegate bureaucratic tasks to administrators with specific responsibilities working in special quality units. One consequence of this delegation of responsibility to specialist administrators was that quality assurance became '*an industry, a technology in its own right*': as time went on, some of the processes became so complex that they needed '*a whole army of people who [acted] as interpreters and mediators and facilitators*' (I: 10). Williams believed that this was a vacuum which the administrators willingly stepped in to fill and recognised that the resistance of most front-line academics to becoming involved with quality assurance had serious consequences: '*There was a kind of Faustian pact, I think, between the academics and the administrators. The administrators said, "Look, you don't really want to deal with all this stuff. Just leave it to us: do as we tell you and we'll get them off your back" ... They left it ... to the administration to deal with and ... this has been one of the major consequences of the failure to engage by the academics: it's given the administrations or management of institutions a new lever*'. He regretted '*the growth of the quality industry because it took the responsibility away from individual academics and turned it into a bureaucratic function rather than a professionalisation*', which thus reduced the potential of quality assurance to promote improvement in teaching quality (I: 9). Barnett similarly recognised

the potential of this development ‘*to reduce the power of the professionals and that goes back to the original inception of the quality movement*’ (I: 8).

There was a parallel here with Fairclough’s ideas about bureaucracy, language and power where experts in organisations gain ‘increased control over people through various forms of bureaucracy’ with a de-professionalising effect on other staff (Fairclough, 1989: 211). Those who have gained power in this way then try to impose ‘an ideological common sense which dictates the organisational culture to which all must subscribe’ (Fairclough, 1989: 86). This phenomenon, observed in the commercial world, where staff have to sign up to a company mission statement while not accepting its culture (Kuenssberg, 2011), was extended in universities to academic staff who felt obliged to subscribe to the ethos of ‘quality’ and to operate bureaucratic systems of quality assurance while not genuinely believing in them. Harvey (2005: 272) observed the frustration of staff in universities where ‘the structuring of procedures entraps them into endorsing the “quality” of a system where they clearly see the quality of provision declining’.

6.5 Higher education as a consumer industry

6.5.1 Education Charters

In a further commercial parallel, the Thatcher and Major governments regarded higher education as a ‘product’ to be measured by ‘the same output and performance assessment criteria as might be applied to the production of goods and services in a real market’ (Johnson, 1994: 375). In this scenario, ‘quality is defined by customers. First of all you agree what the customer wants ... then you produce exactly what is wanted within the agreed time at minimum cost’ (Munro-Faure, 1992: 1). This political priority was embodied in the Citizen’s Charter Initiative introduced by John Major’s government in 1991 which attempted to extend commercial principles of choice, public information and value for money into the public sector in an effort to increase the power of citizens as ‘consumers’ of a wide range of public services (Farrington, 1994).

Separate charters covering higher and further education in the four UK countries appeared in 1993, setting out what ‘a current or prospective student, employer, or member of a local council [could] reasonably expect of colleges and universities’ (Scottish Office Education Department, 1993: 2). The English version, *Higher Quality and Choice*, notably contained

one of the first references to students as ‘the customers of higher education’ (DfE, 1993:

1). The original English document targeted other stakeholders as well as students:

‘This Charter explains the standards of service that students, employers and the general public can expect from universities and colleges and other bodies involved in higher education in England’ (DfE, 1993: 2).

For a number of reasons the education charters did not last, primarily because of doubts that they had any legal force (Farrington (1994). According to Williams *‘those student charters were rather basic and there was no enforcement mechanism... They weren’t enforceable and nobody could remember what was in them’* (I: 9). Despite these reassurances, the universities were apprehensive about the risks of litigation and took care to avoid over-specific commitments in developing their own charters (Farrington, 1994). Sharp believed that they had not fulfilled their potential because *‘the students were frightened to push it too far because of the responsibilities angle and the universities were frightened to push it too far because of rights. So it kind of fell between two stools’* (I: 4).

The universities nevertheless had to adopt a more commercially orientated perspective with a greater focus on satisfying the needs of their customers. Farrington (1994: 133) also accepted that ‘the relationship between institutions and their students is one in which issues of quality are of fundamental importance’ and in such a culture, Pring (1992: 18) commented that ‘market forces define as well as promote standards for the consumer always knows best. Quality is that which pleases the consumer’. Measurement of quality was a crucial element of this market philosophy, as confirmed by Hart’s observation (1997: 295) that ‘quality of provision’ had become ‘the very theme-song or anthem of John Majorism and the Citizen’s Charters’. Quality assurance mechanisms could thus be construed as a defence of consumer interests, verifying the fulfilment of student expectations and the achievement of value for money.

From a Scottish perspective, Masters did not think that the charters were necessarily the major influence in promoting the students’ desire for more influence but by the mid-1990s, although not already paying fees, they were under financial pressure and they were already becoming *‘more demanding of what they got ... more interested in actually what they were getting out of university’*. This meant that *‘more students were having a greater input into what was actually happening’* (I: 5) and more attention was being paid to their views. This changing culture had later important repercussions on the relationship between teachers and students.

6.5.2 Quality assurance as a marketing tool

One of the stated aims of quality assessment was to provide prospective students with information to guide their decisions about where and what subjects to study and it was a short step from there to the universities adopting marketing strategies to attract students. Fairclough (1993) used higher education as an example to illustrate what he called 'the marketization of public discourse'. He demonstrated how universities, under pressure to operate as 'businesses', were having to embrace a 'promotional' or 'consumer' culture, and academic staff were obliged to conform to this practice however alien it might seem to them. This trend towards 'the colonizing of higher education discourse by advertising' (Fairclough, 1993: 143) contributed to the growth of competition within the higher education sector inevitably fuelled by the translation of TQA scores into league tables which from 1995 onwards were published by the media.

6.6 Summary

This chapter has traced the rapid growth of the quality 'industry' in universities during the 1990s and illustrated the aptness of the term to convey the range and volume of work generated by activities associated with quality assurance. It has also demonstrated how externally imposed quality assurance measures became part of the new pressure on universities to become more 'business-like', with greater emphasis on financial controls and performance measurement, while the resulting increase in centralised management and growth of bureaucracy entailed a shift in power from academics to administrators. Numerical performance indicators were introduced to measure the quality of education in terms of productivity, while at the same time, government policy obliged universities to promote the quality of their 'products' in an increasingly competitive market. Use of the term 'quality industry' took on a pejorative sense: 'six tons of paper a year and £250,000 worth of photocopying is the most obvious sign of a huge growth industry in universities: quality assessment' (*The Guardian Education*, 25 January 1994).

CHAPTER 7: THE QUALITY DEBATE

‘Apart from finance, questions of ‘Quality’ and ‘Accountability’ are inevitably going to be the principal themes in the higher education policy debate in future years’ (Loder, 1990: xi).

7.1 Introduction: Quality assurance phase 1, 1992-95

Quality assurance was described as the most ‘contentious area of higher education policy’ to confront the sector as a result of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (Watson, 1995: 326). This chapter demonstrates how the controversies over the implementation of quality assurance in universities grew to the extent that they occupied, in Alderman’s words, ‘the very epicentre of the debate about the future of higher education in Britain’, (Alderman, 1996: 178). Introducing complex recording and reporting systems affecting academics at all levels in the midst of major structural change to the whole sector was never going to be simple. The new arrangements for quality assurance were implemented in autumn 1992 and before the end of the year there was already press comment that ‘Quality Assurance arrangements are going wrong’ (*THES*, 11 December 1992). This albeit hasty judgement gave the newspaper an opportunity to initiate a ‘quality debate’ which was to be a source of headlines for years to come. Quality was news.

7.1.1 A state of shock

As implementation of the quality assurance régime continued, academics’ initial reaction was shock at the speed with which they had been engulfed by the tsunami of new activity surrounding quality assurance. Looking back to the early days, Interviewee 2 commented that *‘it’s difficult to remember what an incredible shock the coming of the university assessment initially was’* (I: 2). A decade later, Deborah Cameron still recalled her surprise on returning to the UK in the early 1990s after a period overseas to hear critical remarks about academics’ teaching being expressed with increasing frequency by politicians and others. This conflicted with her perception that ‘Britain’s system of higher education was by most measures successful at what it did’ (Cameron, 2003: 138). Using an industrial analogy, Knight (1993: 9) wondered at the degree of concern about quality when all the statistics for higher education were indicating success: ‘if British entrepreneurs were as successful as higher education, then we would be asking “What recession?”’. Trow (1994: 31) took a stronger line, commenting on the ‘extraordinary focus in government policy on “quality” in higher education’ when no major problems had been observed ‘in this century’. In short, to many academics the radical reforms seemed excessive – a wholesale

takeover of universities' autonomy when in their view there was little evidence of the need for such intervention.

It was therefore not surprising that negative reactions against quality assurance from the universities were strong. As a former civil servant, Interviewee 6 recalled that *'it was hugely resisted ... Both the politicians and the senior civil servants came under pressure from senior academics: "We're professional people, we've been doing it for hundreds of years, go away" kind of thing'* (I: 6).

7.2 What were they objecting to?

Interviewee 10 gave two obvious answers to this question: *'because the universities prized their autonomy and were not aware of major problems within the system'* (I: 10). The spectrum of objections ranged from issues of principle to specific points about the effects of quality assurance on the daily lives of academics. This diversity of reaction was summed up by Williams who had moved in 1992 from the AAU to become Director of the Quality Assurance Group of the HEQC: *'it was a temperamental thing; it was a sense of professional self-awareness, or lack of self-awareness; it was about traditional views of the academic world; it was about hostility to government, in particular the Conservative government; it was a way of sort of fighting back...'* (I: 9).

7.2.1 Loss of academic autonomy

As universities saw it, the threats to their autonomy encompassed not only new financial controls but ministerial intervention in internal matters including the freedom of individual academics to teach and research their own subjects. Blackstone understood that universities greatly resented the notion that *'ministers sitting in a government department, or more likely their officials, would be telling universities what to do'* (I: 7). The new hegemony brought its own vocabulary, to the extent that Interviewee 6 advocated the need to limit the potential for quality assurance to be used as an instrument to increase political control: *'there is a risk that quality control can slip into thought control'* (I: 6). One of the factors that induced the most hostility was the lip-service commonly paid in legislation, government guidance and political speeches to notions of academic autonomy and the right of universities to manage their own affairs, a repeated mantra which frequently turned out to be completely at odds with the rest of the document or speech.

7.2.2 Professional intrusion

From a professional point of view, individual academics resented the feeling that they were under inspection. As Farrington (1994: 1) put it, ‘Virtually everything they do, from using the telephone to writing a book is now subject to the detailed scrutiny’. Kelly well understood academics’ reaction to this new situation which amounted to *‘suddenly putting a spy in the classroom, as it were, and hackles rose about that’* (I: 3). Williams agreed that a degree of hostility was only to be expected: *‘I think inevitably once you stand there looking at teachers and assessing them, then the dynamic is not going to be very friendly’* (I: 9).

From personal experience, Interviewee 2 gave a vivid picture of academics’ reactions to the demands of quality assurance introduced just after abolition of the binary line. The pre-92 universities had never experienced this degree of external control: *‘TQA interfered with people’s lives more than any subsequent process did because it went into every school and every department’*. From a purely technical point of view, academics found the unfamiliar vocabulary and reporting mechanisms confusing and irrelevant: *‘we had never thought about them, we didn’t particularly want to think about them, they were of no great value to us’* (I: 2).

A further possible explanation for resistance to quality assurance procedures was offered by Masters, who suggested that academics’ predictable resentment of intrusion might be accompanied by lack of confidence about their ability to respond to the demands of teaching the greatly increased numbers and diversity of students now attending universities particularly in times of financial stringency: *‘basically all you’d done is build bigger lecture theatres, you hadn’t actually changed what you were doing’* (I: 5).

7.2.3 Complexity of higher education

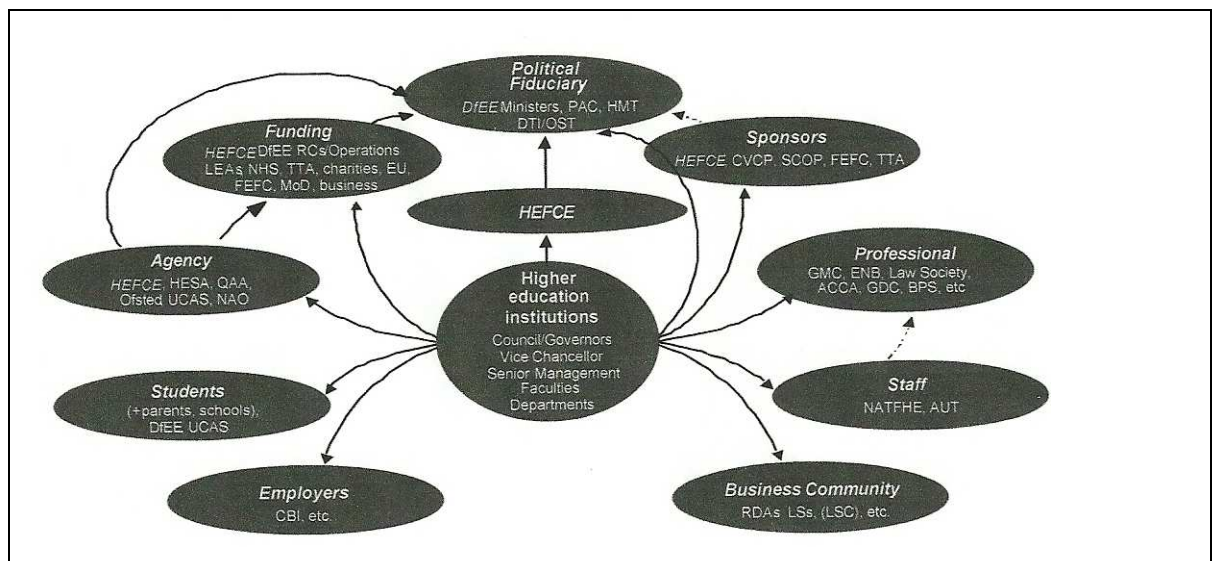
A major cause of disharmony during the 1990s was the sheer complexity of the greatly enlarged UK higher education sector (Trowler (1998)). The ever-lengthening lists of acronyms accompanying literature of this period revealed the labyrinth of new structures and the multiplicity of organisations with different hierarchies and competing interests. As future employers of graduates, professional and statutory bodies had a crucial interest in the quality of education in their specialities and as time passed, their growing requirements exerted ‘a significant and powerful external influence on the quality and standards of

provision in virtually all HEIs' (Parry, 2002: 4). These relationships were particularly important for the post-92 universities many of which offered mainly vocational courses and this dimension of their work inevitably added to the number of different quality assurance processes. The processes by which they reviewed curricula and courses for the purpose of accreditation were accepted as an essential part of quality assurance but were inevitably resented when they duplicated the other external processes of audit and assessment. Interviewee 10 agreed that there were '*too many competing regulators each having a slightly different kind of methodology*' (I:10).

A report from PA Consulting (2000: 14) demonstrated the results of this increasing complexity over time, as illustrated by Figure 2:

'The relationships between stakeholders and HEIs, and between stakeholders themselves, are often fragmented, unco-ordinated and insular. There was a distinct lack of the mutual understanding on which better accountability arrangements could be built. This in turn, has generated duplication and/or unjustified data requirements, intrusive checks and mutual misunderstandings'.

Figure 2: Stakeholders in the Higher Education Sector (PA Consulting, 2000: 14)



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The universities and individual academics had an uphill struggle to satisfy the diverse and increasing demands of so many stakeholders with diverse interests in quality. Barnett (1992) was struck by the challenge for the system in responding to the voices of the many groups including students, parents and employers all expressing their own views about the quality of education.

7.2.4 Unsuitable methodology

There were vociferous objections to the inappropriateness of applying quantitative measurement to teaching, especially in the absence of clear criteria for what made ‘good’ quality. Pring (1992: 10) criticised this approach which he saw as ‘increasingly modelled on that of industry’ and required ‘the adoption of business practice’. Trow (1994: 14-15) condemned the assessment of both teaching and research as products of a government desire to assess the strengths and weaknesses of universities in purely financial terms – ‘to find or create a ‘bottom line’ that performs the function of a profit and loss sheet for commercial business’. Hart (1997: 295) agreed that this concept of quality which had originated in industry could have an adverse effect on higher education. Harvey and Knight (1996: 68) also criticised this ‘economic, utilitarian approach’ which took no account of ‘the outcomes of the learning process itself’ while Johnson (1994: 378) deplored the fact that this kind of measurement had become ‘an obsession of the present government, a litany recited with unreflecting dogmatism day in, day out’.

The announcement by HEFCE (C39/94) that the award of the lowest grade (1) for the 1995/96 round of assessments might lead to a ‘warning’ potentially resulting in a withdrawal of funding was flagged up by Griffith, (*THES*, 18 November 1994) as a source for further anxiety about the scoring system. Barnett (I: 8) saw this as a possible first step towards implementation of the link between quality and funding that had been announced in legislation and guidance (FHEA 1992 and HEFCE Circular 3/93) but not yet implemented in England.

The involvement of serving academics complied with the accepted academic principle of ‘peer review’. Williams (I: 9) had praised the quality of the original AAU auditors, and subsequently Interviewee 10, from his knowledge of the audit processes under the HEQC, mentioned that the auditors ‘*were relatively high-powered individuals*’ who conducted a wide-ranging discussion with academics which delivered ‘*a very powerful kind of model*’ (I: 10). However, audit reports identified some concern about the ongoing supply of ‘suitable people’ to serve as auditors (Coopers, 1993: 8), and in relation to assessors there had been reports of a ‘lack of professionalism’ (CHES, 1994: 22). Were they sufficiently well-qualified in their subjects to pass judgement on their peers? Did they understand the culture of the institutions they were assessing? Kelly believed that ‘*there was a massive problem of quality control of assessors*’ (I: 3). Interviewee 1 agreed that ‘*the biggest point*

of question was often about the quality of the auditors', an idea echoed by Williams who detected a *'rather conceited or disparaging de haut en bas approach'* (I: 9).

Drawing on his own experience as an assessor, Alderman (1996: 187) voiced specific criticisms which explained some of the controversies caused by this system: the criteria for the scoring system were not revealed; the training of assessors was in his view 'grossly inadequate'; and the intrusive nature of the questions promoted 'a culture of compliance', reinforced by the imposition of a 'gagging clause' which prevented assessors from public discussion of the assessment process. For his part, Barnett doubted that the assessors' methodology *'was sophisticated enough to allow them to ... listen to and appreciate exactly what an institution was and then evaluate it and then come out with a judgement on a numerical scale such that a 4 in one place meant the same or was it meant to be different from a 4 in another place?'* He feared that *'once one started to identify different criteria, once one started to assign numbers to different criteria, then one would be into league tables, one would be into a punitive public scenario'* (I: 8), a prediction which soon proved all too true.

7.2.5 The bureaucratic burden

Part of the hostility to quality assurance arose from the fact that these external demands were being imposed on universities in addition to the internal administrative processes which were increasing during this period as part of the management reforms. Wagner (1993: 274) reported on the results of a survey published in the *THES* of 21 January 1993 in which 82% of vice-chancellors had criticised the arrangements as 'too bureaucratic'. The main objections centred on 'the time and cost involved, the methodology, the guidelines for self-assessment and the inexperience of the inspectors' all of which became recurring themes in the catalogue of protests (Wagner 1993: 281). Similar protests arose in Scotland where both assessors and universities commented on the time required to compile and to read the information and advocated greater standardisation of the documentation: one departmental return had 'required a wheelbarrow to deliver it to the SHEFC offices' (Johnstone *et al.*, 1995: 12).

Williams sympathised with the universities' reaction, pointing out the particular burden of individual subject assessments where a large university offering up to 60 subjects could be subjected to several reviews each year over the course of the of the 7-year cycle in England. *'I'm not surprised they got cross about it... Because they were different teams*

they always asked the same people the same questions. Hopeless. I had every sympathy with them' (I: 9).

The post-92 universities were already familiar with this kind of regulatory approach and it was argued with some justification that the kind of documentation required by quality assurance systems (e.g. course outlines and annual monitoring reviews, external examiners' reports and student evaluations) could reasonably have been expected to be produced by all universities as a matter of routine. However, this was by no means the case for some of the older universities so it was a considerable administrative task for them to develop these systems from scratch in time for the first quality audits and subject assessments. Interviewee 2 recalled the unwelcome realisation that *'quality assurance requires an awful lot of work on the part of the assured, really an awful lot'* (I: 2).

However, Interviewee 3 commented that *'the dishonesty was to claim that this was an inevitable consequence of the system. It wasn't. It was catch-up. They'd never done the job before and they hadn't got it'* (I: 3). What was justified in his view was academics' increasing resentment of the inexorable repetition of the assessment cycles. In Williams' view, doubts that the members of the visiting assessment teams could adequately digest the information contained within the *'thousands and thousands and thousands of documents'* assembled for audit and assessment only served to increase the resentment of those who had been involved in assembling it (I: 9).

Some efforts were made to limit the bureaucratic burden. As Sharp (I: 4) pointed out, the strain of producing the information was greatly reduced once the progressive introduction of reliable IT systems into universities enabled the information to be generated, transmitted and stored electronically. And to some extent there was discretion to moderate the burdens. Masters understood the importance of preventing any assessment system from being overwhelmed by bureaucracy. *'The key issue was the peer review not the bureaucracy which surrounded it'* (I: 5). His committee therefore consciously attempted to reduce the number of forms. Nevertheless, the bureaucratic burden became and remained one of the major complaints made by a chorus of voices about the demands of quality assurance.

7.2.6 Audit and assessment: duplication of processes

As predicted, the universities' resentment of quality assurance mechanisms was exacerbated by the overlap between the twin processes of audit and assessment which operated in parallel, each making demands for information, each requiring preparation for

visits and each delivering judgements which would affect the universities' future and reputation. Though audit (overseen by the HEQC) focused on systems at institutional level and assessment (administered by the Funding Councils) examined the teaching of individual subjects, duplication in the documentation required was inevitable, not to mention the double stress of repeated visits.

Gordon (1993: 18-19) described the confusion caused by two systems 'operated by different bodies, using different methodologies and seeking different outcomes' which inevitably had potential to cause 'considerable confusion amongst academics about the distinctive contribution of each process and/or the ensuing benefits'. As Sharp explained, '*I think over that phase, '92 to '97, there was an unnecessary burden because as well as the Funding Councils' TQA you had the HEQC doing their audits. It really was a double whammy*' (I: 4). Resistance to this dual burden became the main focus of the objections during the first phase of quality assurance. (Wagner, 1993) and Farrington (1994: 97) drew attention to 'pressures for the processes to be combined as a more effective use of resources'. Press comment pointed out that compliance with these requirements was accompanied by 'the mutterings and curses of frustrated and angry academic staff who [saw] their teaching and research being progressively hampered' (*The Guardian Education*, 25 January 1994).

7.2.7 Costs of quality assurance

In addition, there were inevitable objections to the additional costs of the new quality assurance arrangements. Wagner (1993: 282) had pointed out that for the vast majority of institutions involved, the outcome of the audit and assessment exercises would be 'a single worded judgement', while funding allocations for only the other ten to fifteen percent (i.e. those awarded 'excellent' or 'unsatisfactory') would be influenced by the judgement. These early predictions of complaints about costs were fulfilled, and vice-chancellors appeared justified in challenging the quality assurance system when the number of subject assessments graded 'unsatisfactory' turned out to be infinitesimal.⁵ While acknowledging that the achievement of quality would inevitably incur costs, Green (1993: 11) warned that 'it cannot be in the interests of any stakeholder that the aggregate costs of accountability exceed the benefits', while Knight (1993: 11) argued that 'the assessment of teaching needs itself to be assessed in value-for-money terms'. From his position as head of a

⁵ The number of 'unsatisfactories' awarded in quality assessments between 1992-95 amounted to just 1.3% Brown (2004: 76).

research council, Amann (1995: 479) called for 'a detailed cost-benefit analysis of the contemporary culture of audit and accountability'.

Sir Michael Thompson, vice-chancellor of Birmingham University estimated the cost of the double audit and assessment process to the higher education sector as £130m per year and questioned whether this was a justifiable use of the sector's resources (*THES*, 21 May 1993). In similar vein, some universities in Scotland queried 'whether the investment of time and effort ... was really justified by the value of the outcome' (Johnstone *et al.* 1995: 2). Another aspect was the lack of incentives in the system, even in Scotland where achievement of an 'excellent' grade was initially rewarded by a 5% increase in funding for extra places. Sir David Smith, Principal of Edinburgh University, complained that the extra places granted as a reward to a department in Scotland, worth only about £30,000 in cash terms in 1994, were not sufficient to provide an incentive ⁶. The House of Lords once again became an outlet for lively protests by champions of the universities. In a debate about the impacts of the first year of quality assurance, the question of unreasonable costs featured prominently. Lord Annan revealed that for the most recent assessment in the University of Edinburgh, 'the university had to submit documents weighing well over a hundredweight. Two hundred people prepared them at a total cost of eight man years in staff time and the photocopies required cost £3,500' (Hansard, House of Lords debate, 6 December 1993). He complained that 'at the very moment when universities have been screwed financially and need every penny to keep teachers in post and research on the boil, a vast new administrative burden has been put on their shoulders and removes what money they can cobble together for teaching and forces the teachers to become low grade administrators'. The Higher Education Minister, Baroness Blatch, gave a dismissive response to complaints about the costs of quality control: 'the cost appears to be 0.5 per cent or less of the average public funding for the activity. That compares with total annual spending on higher education of more than £5 billion' (Hansard 6 December 1993: 9). In comparison with this total, the costs were thus 'relatively small'. This attitude was certainly at odds with the prevailing demands for audit and transparency in the management of public funds.

A further cause for resentment was the government's pressure on the universities to deliver value for money. For many academics the paradoxical demand to improve quality against a background of higher student numbers and reducing funding seemed unreasonable and unachievable. Lord Annan protested that there was 'no perfect connection between money

⁶ This system of reward was never adopted in England.

and academic quality, but there must be some connection between the two. If laboratories are so crowded that students cannot get into practicals, if libraries are so destitute of basic books for courses, what kind of education can students get?' (Hansard, 6 December 1993).

7.2.8 Assessment to 'inform funding and reward excellence'

The importance of the research funding awarded to institutions from 1985 had encouraged universities, departments and individual academics to prioritise research over teaching. The proposal in the 1992 Act to link quality assessment with funding by offering financial incentives to departments achieving 'excellent' or reducing the funding of departments rated 'unsatisfactory' was intended to redress this balance. The key guidance document for the implementation of quality assessment (HEFCE 3/93) reiterated the idea that 'the maintenance and enhancement of quality' could be achieved by relating funding to the Council's assessment of teaching quality. The duty to 'inform funding and reward excellence', (M2/94 para 11.6) was accompanied by a threat that funding would be removed from substandard provision. According to Williams, in the early stages '*the logistical, practical lever has been through the money*' (I: 9) and it was claimed that this financial link was already having 'a significant impact on institutions' attitudes to quality and quality control in teaching' (Coopers, 1993: 4).

On the other hand initial objections from academics to the principle and practice of this policy continued. They opposed the idea that 'quality should legitimate reductions in funding and more central control' (Harvey, 2005: 267) and questions were raised about how this link between assessment of teaching and funding could be implemented, (Wagner, 1993, Tasker and Packham, 1994, Johnson, 1994, Yorke, 1995). Masters agreed with the Scottish Funding Council's policy of awarding a small percentage of additional funds to departments achieving 'excellent': '*there should be some financial benefit from an institution being judged as being good at teaching*' (I: 5) and in the first cycle of quality assessments in Scotland, awards ceremonies were held to mark this achievement. However, this practice was discontinued in 1994 when the number of funded places was capped by the Funding Councils and this policy was never implemented in England.

7.3 A spectrum of reactions

Many academics thus objected on principle to government interference in the universities and, at a practical level, to the impact of quality assurance requirements on their working lives and they expressed their opposition in a variety of ways.

7.3.1 Defiance

This chapter has cited vociferous and persistent objections by academics to external attempts to impose accountability on universities through the medium of quality assurance and indeed some interviewees agreed that these went too far. Interviewee 6 commented that even in the late 1990s some academics were still complaining about such measures as the requirement to state learning outcomes saying *'we know what we're going to do, we don't need to write it down'* (I: 6). Despite having some sympathy with academics' arguments, Blackstone was critical of the attitude of some *'rather arrogant institutions'* who simply claimed *'we're too grand for anybody outside to look at what we're doing'* (I: 7).

7.3.2 Pragmatism

A more pragmatic reaction by many was to accept the inevitability of quality assurance, even reluctantly, and to adopt a kind of cynical compliance in its implementation. Barnett agreed that there was *'widespread cynicism and by and large people will play the game'* which entailed complying with the detailed rules of the quality assurance systems, however unnecessary they might seem. *'The sector has paid lip-service to those sorts of requirements, it's 'gone through the hoops', 'jumped over the hurdles', to use whatever metaphor one wants, and complied'* (I: 8). A more positive kind of pragmatism was described by Interviewee 2, who had become closely involved in the operation of quality assurance in his own university and within the wider sector, despite having personal reservations about it. He explained that once he and colleagues in similar positions had decided it was inescapable, they *'might as well get as much good as they could out of it'* and he had found that this pragmatic attitude had given him a lot of *'cred'* among his colleagues (I: 2).

7.3.3 Playing the system

There was evidence of different reactions at different levels. Senior academics in particular came to understand the strategic importance for the universities of receiving good audit and assessment reports, particularly after 1995 when the numerical scoring system led to the inevitable publication of league tables. Accordingly, they quickly learned to play the system. Williams attributed the origin of game-playing to the innately '*inspectorial approach*' of the TQA. '*It was perceived to be threatening, it was therefore to be subverted and up to a point it was subverted, I think, quite cleverly, by all the old tricks that one was told about like if the assessors were coming you made sure your weakest lecturer was at a conference in Australia...*' (I: 9).

7.3.4 Evasion

From his professional position in the world of quality assurance, Williams observed that many academics tried to dissociate themselves from it. '*The general run of the mill didn't want anything to do with it ... There was no real understanding amongst most of the academic community about what quality assurance was. It became merely a series of hoops*' (I: 9). He felt this was a lost opportunity, as did Interviewee 10 who regretted that many of the policy makers – senior academics, including vice-chancellors – did not understand the potential of quality assurance to achieve improvement in addition to being an instrument of regulation. They were '*not really interested in quality. They don't understand it, they don't think it's important*' (I: 10).

7.4 Modes of resistance

7.4.1 The scholarship of opposition

Predictably, many academics resorted to print to express their resistance, using their skill in argument and power of rhetoric to attack both the practical aspects of quality assurance systems and its underlying principles and theories. From the early 1990s onwards much of the academic literature described in Chapter 6 as part of the quality 'industry' represented a kind of 'scholarship of opposition' in which books and journal articles about quality were peppered with scholarly allusions and colourful metaphors in order to bolster their arguments.

Sometimes commentators constructed highly elaborate critiques of the theory and methods of quality assurance. In a public lecture in 1995, Professor Ron Amann (1995: 468) combined his specialist knowledge of Soviet science policy and subsequent experience as Chief Executive of the Economic and Social Research Council, to construct an extended parallel between Soviet central planning systems and ‘the growing managerial pressures in the public sector in Britain’, of which quality assurance was an important feature. Hart (1997: 297) ridiculed the reduction of value judgements to an emphasis on ‘the best buy’ which resembled a customer declaring that he had ‘got his money’s worth’ from a performance of *King Lear*, or taking the concept of quality to mean that ‘Mozart’s *Requiem*, say, has more to offer the listener... than the average advertising jingle’. In his scathing criticism of the ‘qualitymongers’, he contrasted the adoption of quality assurance as a ‘technology’ to be scientifically applied to the measurement of education with the thoughtful, value-based judgements of literature and the arts offered by such critics as Eliot and Leavis. He ended his article with a highly satirical mock report on Wittgenstein’s teaching style by an imaginary TQA assessor observing a lecture. The most striking example of the use of humour as a weapon in the armoury of opposition from the 1990s onwards was Professor Laurie Taylor’s well-known weekly column in the *THES* satirising life in the post-92 University of Poppleton. The theories, practices and jargon of quality assurance frequently featured in the exchanges among a cast of familiar characters such as Professor Lapping, Head of Media Studies, Jamie Targett, Director of Corporate Affairs, the often absent Dr Piercemuller and the long-suffering secretary, Maureen who shouldered most of the work of the department.

7.4.2 Undermining impact

Although universities had no choice but to comply with the system, some institutions and individual academics did what they could to undermine the practical effects of quality assurance. One way of doing this was to avoid taking action on reports. An interviewee who had served as a lay member on the governing body of a university described the resistance he had encountered to the idea of any action being taken in response to a quality report on departments. His questions ‘*Well what happens now? Where’s the action plan?*’ (I: 6) were greeted with blank faces and eventual reluctant agreement to come back with another report in six months time. Another area of resistance was the slowness with which some universities embraced the idea of introducing staff training as a way of improving

university teaching. Recalling that he himself had had *'virtually no training in how to teach, literally half a day'*, Interviewee 2 reported that the idea that staff should attend training was taken *'very cynically by most staff members for a long time'* (I: 2) and although it was in theory compulsory, the requirement had rarely been enforced by his university until very recently. Williams explained the frustration he had felt later as Director of the QAA: *'nobody wants to be either 'developed' or accountable... They couldn't avoid the accountability but they've done everything they possibly could to avoid development, apart from the enthusiasts of whom there were a few but not many'* (I: 9).

7.5 Why academics lost the argument

7.5.1 Lack of resistance

Though many academics thus demonstrated their opposition to quality assurance in a number of ways, some commentators expressed surprise at the relative lack of opposition. Johnson (1994: 371) detected *'no sign of an uprising in the besieged ivory towers'*. Barnett drew attention to the fact that *'there was no systematic resistance by the sector as a whole. It was quite extraordinary that the universities ... seemed to go along with all of this'*. Rather than focusing on the resistance by academics, he suggested, the important question should be *'how do we account for that compliance of the sector?... Why did they provoke so little response and so little resistance? Because one didn't see vice-chancellors marching down Whitehall, or the equivalent, or even lobbying together, not very seriously, or writing furious letters en masse to the newspapers'* (I: 8).

7.5.2 Force majeure

A primary reason for the lack of successful opposition was political: the government was firmly in control. Quality assurance remained a key element of higher education policy and the Education Acts of 1998 and 1992 had created the power to implement it. In their public speeches and writings, Ministers continued to bang the quality drum as, for example, when the Education Secretary, John Patten, set out his vision for higher education in *The Times* of 6 December 1993 under the headline *'Only quality can save universities'*. His clear message was that universities must continue expansion, but not at the expense of standards.

While rejecting arguments about costs, the government was equally unsympathetic to complaints about the bureaucratic burdens of quality assurance. In a scathing reply in the House of Lords debate mentioned above, Baroness Blatch skilfully diverted responsibility for any shortcomings in the quality assurance systems on to the HEQC and the Funding Councils (Hansard, 6 December 1993). She spiked the universities' guns by announcing that the government had already asked the two agencies to draw up proposals to 'minimise duplication and bureaucracy' while any concerns about the quality of the assessors must be referred to the vice-chancellors themselves who had recommended them for appointment. Reverting finally to the familiar mantra, she reiterated the government's total commitment 'to the principle of academic autonomy and to freeing universities from bureaucratic constraints as far as possible' but followed up with an uncompromising reminder that 'academic autonomy does not remove the need for accountability'. Game, set and match to the government.

Some of the interviewees for this study believed that when faced with the imposition of quality assurance the universities had had little choice but to conform. Kelly understood the government's threat '*that if you don't regulate yourselves we shall impose regulation on the universities*' and even if this had been '*a bluffing exercise*', in practical terms there was no choice (I: 3). Sharp thought that the main pressure was financial: the universities now felt dependent on the new Funding Councils '*which were going to dish out the money*' and the threat of a link between quality assurance and funding remained (I: 4). Williams also recognised that bowing to the external imperative could be in the universities' own interest: '*the university cannot ignore what's imposed from outside, whether that's good or bad: it has to come to terms with it. And a sensible university of course will want to do as well as it can*' (I: 9).

7.5.3 Public accountability

In this political context it was impossible for the universities to deny the government's case for introducing quality assurance as a means of imposing public accountability on higher education. Kelly argued that it was entirely reasonable to expect universities to be accountable for their spending of public funds: '*any other position would have been untenable given the developments in other sectors*' (I: 3) Though universities might be differently constituted from other services, there was no justification for them to be exempt from scrutiny. '*It simply isn't good enough to pour all this public funding into universities*

and simply say we trust you to do a good job ... For me, the reason that quality assessment could have been a force for good was because it brought accountability into the process. It meant that you couldn't just take the money and do next year what you did this year: you had to monitor and account for what you were doing' (I: 3). Another ex-civil servant also found *'not difficult at all the notion that government should be interested in the efficiency of higher education and in the outcomes, including employability'* (I: 6). Blackstone saw this as part of a *'general move towards greater regulation of publicly funded institutions which was something I don't think one can dispute if there's money going into it.... And in a sense you can argue why not universities too which were in receipt of public funding?'* (I: 7). For Interviewee 1, quality assurance, as a way of measuring the quality of teaching, was *'a very important plank in the sidewalk of accountability. Cash comes out, you get paid for doing this, are you accountable?'* (I: 1).

7.5.4 Strong central management

From an operational point of view it was hard to mount effective opposition. Within the first year, the Funding Councils and the HEQC had proved themselves both structurally and operationally prepared for the tasks of assessment and audit. The complexity and frequency of the new demands came as a shock, particularly to the pre-92 universities, but almost before they knew it, they found themselves caught up in the system. Blackstone pointed out the importance of leadership from the top in influencing academics' reactions to quality assurance. *'If whoever is running an institution is wholly opposed to changes of that sort that will infect the culture. If on the other hand they're wholly in favour of it, the reverse: it will help to create a culture that accepts that this is something you do and it isn't as bad as people make out'* (I: 7).

University leaders might have particular institutional reasons to favour the changes. The disciplines of quality assurance could become a management tool to help them to gain more control over uncooperative staff in the face of reducing resources. By the same token, critical assessments could act as useful motivators for promoting change. Barnett mentioned *'a certain quietness on the part of managers because all the moves that the government has made have simply given managers more and more levers to manage and control their turbulent academics'* (I: 8).

7.5.5 Consultation with the higher education sector

The leaders of HEFCE had realised the importance of involving academics in consultation about the processes of quality assurance in an effort to defuse opposition. Interviewee 1 gave a revealing description of the process: *‘a lot of it was done by putting together groups of people from the sector and saying ‘how do you think this should be done?’* One response from academics was clear: *‘insofar as the older universities were concerned, if it was not based upon peer review they would be deeply agitated and upset’*. Care was therefore taken to ensure that they would be assessed by their peers rather than a body of external inspectors. *‘You essentially got the peers to invent the peer review. And they bought into that. It wasn’t a group of us sitting in Bristol in a darkened room with a wet towel round our heads inventing a system. It was saying you as a sector need to be involved in setting up the process because you’re going to have to take ownership of it’* (I: 1). Masters described a similar situation in Scotland. Though the introduction of quality assessment was a statutory obligation, *‘the way they did it was very much left to the Funding Council. We consulted, we decided that it should be a peer review process similar to how research worked. So it would be peers making judgements, that was the first point’* (I: 5). He was also very keen that the assessment process should not become just a paper exercise and tried to reduce the bureaucracy involved. *‘At the end of the day the key issue was the peer review and not the bureaucracy which surrounded it ... The idea of doing a quality assessment purely based on input data was alien to the whole concept of it’* (I: 5). Kelly also referred to the introduction of quality assessment in Scotland: *‘What it depended on was the ability of the Funding Council both to stick to the script and to win round the universities to do it. They had to do both jobs, they had to be diplomatic about it’* (I: 3). A report by McNay on the revised assessment method introduced from April 1995 emphasised that its changes also been based on ‘the findings from extensive consultation’ (HEFCE, M1/97: 3). HEFCE was satisfied that the moves to universal visiting, the set of six core aspects of provision, the four-point assessment scale and the graded profile had been introduced ‘as a result of strong support from the sector’. So although the changes had given rise to much negative reaction, Professor David Watson, then Chair of HEFCE’s Quality Assessment Committee, believed that the consultative processes undertaken by HEFCE in the development of quality assurance systems reflected a ‘genuine desire to engage with institutions in dialogue’ which undoubtedly eased the implementation process (Watson, 1995: 330).

Despite such attempts to encourage co-operation, objections were inevitably raised, and when this happened, there was no doubt who was in charge. At a conference after the first round of subject-based assessments, there had been an uncompromising answer from the chief executive of HEFCE to university protests that the system was too intrusive: *'Well to my mind it was a very simple price to pay for the autonomy you have because it is still a peer assessment, you are largely in control of it, my unit at the Funding Council is primarily there for the logistics of the process and that's the way it should be'* (I: 1).

7.5.6 Valid concerns about teaching quality

Concerns of industrialists about the failure of higher education to produce graduates adequately prepared for employment and anxieties about the reputation of UK higher education abroad reinforced governmental pressure on universities to improve quality (Brown, 2004). Sharp recalled that *'UK ministers from their trips overseas from time to time would come back with horror stories about alleged bad practice of British universities overseas'* (I: 4).

Importantly, there was also some evidence of poor teaching in the universities which made the legitimacy of assessing its quality hard to challenge. Looking back on his time as a young academic, Interviewee 1 remembered the poor quality of lecturing in what he called *'the prehistoric days'* when lecturers *'came in and stood at the rostrum and read their notes, not a bit of eye contact'* (I: 1). Kelly made a broader criticism: *'The problem is of course that there's no pedagogy in universities. I mean how on earth can you assess teaching if people aren't taught how to teach, or there's no structure to how they teach?'* (I: 3). Some students were dissatisfied with the quality of teaching. A survey undertaken in 1993 by the London University Institute of Education involving 4,000 interviews at 68 universities reported student criticism of lecturers who appeared uninterested in their subjects and old-fashioned in their teaching methods, while student feedback was too rarely sought or taken into account (*THES*, 19 March, 1993). Introducing the article, Jennie Brookman raised the question: *'why should higher education students accept a lecturer with an unproven teaching record? ... The standard answer – that academics' professionalism is rooted in their specialist subjects – is no longer sufficient'*. Bell (1992: 128) welcomed the new drive for quality assurance, believing it *'essential for each individual, each group, each organization not only to claim to provide a quality service, but to be able to demonstrate to outsiders that such claims can be substantiated'*. Rejecting arguments about the infringement of academic autonomy, she had been willing to accept a

high level of monitoring of her teaching during a year spent in the USA because ‘the emphasis was on providing the best possible service *for the students*’ (Bell: 1992: 130).

In an interview with the *THES* (6 July, 1990) Williams, then Director of the fledgling AAU, advocated the need for robust systems of audit to back up claims of good quality: ‘universities maintain that they produce quality products. But it always struck me that they opened themselves to criticism if anyone said “prove it”’. Bell (1992: 129) argued that ‘good teachers’ had always had methods of reflecting on the effectiveness of their teaching but there had been no requirement to report on them publicly: ‘their version of quality assurance had been a private matter’. Moreover she pointed out that, though this system might have worked well for good teachers, there had been no way of checking on inadequate performance. She now believed it essential ‘for each individual, each group, each organisation not only to claim to provide a quality service, but to be able to demonstrate to outsiders how such claims can be substantiated’ (Bell, 1992: 128).

7.5.7 Opposition divided

It has thus become clear that despite the strength of some academics’ hostility, a number of factors combined to make the introduction of quality assurance hard to resist. But another dimension was the lack of concerted opposition by those who were against it. This lack of consensus was understandable. Staff in the former polytechnics who were now in the majority numerically, were very familiar with systems of inspection and assessment and less likely to be opposed to the new systems than academics in the pre-92 universities for whom the new systems were completely alien. Sharp highlighted the contrast between the starting point of the former polytechnics which had ‘*a very rigorous quality system, a very public quality system*’ and the pre-92 universities with their own less transparent systems which ‘*arguably perhaps in some cases weren’t as robust as it might have been*’ (I: 4). Quality assurance systems were intended to be an instrument for remedying these shortcomings. Interviewees 3 and 6 agreed that the initial impacts of quality audit and quality assessment were greater in the pre-92 than the post-92 universities which were already accustomed to such processes. Kelly explained the need for careful handling of the two different sectors. The main impact of quality assurance occurred when arrangements were being ‘*systematised, codified, regularised and extended*’ within the ‘old’ universities (I: 3).

Wagner (1993: 276) put forward a plausible theory that in the lead-up to the abolition of the binary line, the lack of opposition to the government's proposal for the merger of the two sectors had been the result of a temporary 'identity of interest' between the polytechnics and the pre-92 universities. The former were keen to reduce their existing external quality assurance requirements while the latter wished to maintain their current level of autonomy. 'Both accepted the need for accountability, but wished to retain, as far as possible, within their own hands the power to determine its nature'. They had therefore agreed to co-operate. As problems with the quality assurance arrangements became apparent, however, their commonality of interest broke down and the universities thus became disunited in their opposition (Wagner, 1993: 285).

It fell to the CVCP to lead the opposition to the imposition of quality assessment by the Funding Councils but it became increasingly difficult for the university leaders to reach a united opinion in the enlarged sector after 1992 when the number of vice-chancellors was greatly increased and institutional interests became more diverse. The group then found it hard to reach a common line for lobbying, which led to the rise of internal factions such as the Russell Group⁷ and others. The prominent status of many individual vice-chancellors either in their academic subjects or in various aspects of public life also meant that they would not necessarily adhere to a common line. Although to some extent quality assurance acted as a 'unifying force for the CVCP to express its concerted unhappiness with the Funding Councils' (Watson, 1995: 334), the vice-chancellors themselves became divided. Indeed one faction asserted that there was 'no practical way of stopping assessment' enshrined as it was in the 1992 Act and backed by the power of the Funding Councils (Wagner, 1993: 283). In support of this argument, Griffith (*THES*, 18 November, 1994) furthermore pointed out that the CVCP's failure to confront the government might have arisen from caution that opposition could have worse repercussions than co-operation. Many academics were dissatisfied with the CVCP's level of protest against quality assurance. Johnson (1994: 377) dismissed it as 'a broken reed' and two-thirds of the academics participating in a study by Kogan and Hanney (2000) were critical of its lack of effectiveness. However, as subsequent chapters will show, the CVCP several times played a decisive role in influencing politicians to change their position in confrontations about quality assurance.

⁷ The Russell Group, set up in 1994 by a number of pre-92 universities, claimed to represent the interests of research-intensive universities which frequently wished to express their own point of view on specific issues.

7.6 The case for quality assurance

Though many academics disliked the intrusive effects that quality assurance was having on their working lives, it was hard to make a principled argument against quality itself and thus, by extension, not easy to oppose measures that were intended to promote improvement. For some university teachers, becoming accustomed to the new systems reduced concern, particularly when some benefits of quality assurance began to become apparent. For example Masters observed that *'probably deep down once they saw it wasn't actually going to destroy the system overnight, do you know I think a lot of people in a funny sort of way welcomed it because it ... at least moved the spotlight away from research to teaching'* (I: 5). Professor John Sizer, Chief Executive of SHEFC, in an introductory letter to his first *Annual Report*, was similarly positive: 'the teams were very well received by staff and students involved in the assessment process. They were generally impressed by the willingness of staff to discuss the problems of their departments in an open and constructive manner' (SHEFC, 1993).

Staff groups most likely to take a positive attitude to quality assurance were those who had experienced its possible benefits through personal participation in the process as auditors or assessors. Sharp remembered that even before the 1992 Act a few academics from older universities who had served as external assessors in some of the CNAA processes had been quite attracted by the idea of a transfer of what they had seen to the university sector: *'We really should have something like this'*. Their recognition of the benefits of such quality systems had created *'a bit of an appetite, at least among a small group, but probably quite an influential group of academics'* who would then become advocates for quality assurance in the combined sector (I: 4).

Interviewee 1 identified another positive factor: evidence of high quality. *'On the whole the sector in every one of the jurisdictions performed pretty well. I mean in the first round of quality assessments the number of 'unsatisfactories' were very, very few'* (I: 1).

Early evidence of benefits of quality assurance helped to reduce staff anxiety about quality assurance: *'at the end of the day, you're trying to assess what's going on in the teaching domain so the quality of the teaching that's being delivered is improved, ... the learning experience of the student is improved'* (I: 1). By the mid-1990s, these factors led to some degree of acquiescence in the sector.

7.7 *The quality debate continued ...*

This chapter has shown that the principles and practices of quality assurance were strongly resisted by many academics at the start but their protests did little to prevent the embedding of the systems of audit and assessment. Government control and the efficiency of the new agencies facilitated the implementation of systems throughout the sector. Many academics continued the debate but their opposition was divided and their views lacked coherent focus. There were powerful arguments against them and though the force of their rhetoric may have allowed them to vent their spleen and to attract attention to their cause in the headlines of the *THES*, their protests had little practical effect. Some of the resistance gradually subsided but concerns remained or were exacerbated by changes in the quality assurance systems themselves. The quality debate was by no means over.

CHAPTER 8: PHASES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE, 1992-2004

‘Nothing is inevitable until it happens’ (Brown, 2004: 12).

8.1 Introduction

As my research progressed, I gradually gained an understanding that the development of quality assurance can be viewed in four distinct phases which are listed in Table 3.2. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 focused on Phase 1 (1992-95): legislative reforms and the introduction of quality assurance into the universities. This chapter describes the subsequent three phases, phase 2 (1995-97) when academics’ opposition to the new scoring system from 1995 led up to the government’s decision to combine the functions of audit and assessment under the new Quality Assurance Agency in 1997; phase 3 (1997-2002) covering the QAA’s turbulent early years which culminated in ministerial intervention to reduce the burden of quality assurance to a ‘lighter touch’; and phase 4 (2002-2004) describing the introduction of reformed quality assurance systems and the Labour Government’s Higher Education Act which attempted to safeguard the quality of higher education by increasing both Treasury funding and the level of student tuition fees.

8.2 Quality assurance, phase 2, 1995-97

8.2.1 The ‘double whammy’

Sharp’s expressive phrase *‘a double whammy’* aptly described the increasing burden being imposed on universities by quality audit and the TQA, a structure which was unstable from the start.

The two systems nominally shared the goal of improvement. A stated purpose of quality assessment was ‘to encourage improvements in the quality of education’ (HEFCE, 1993, C 3/93) while the HEQC’s original guidelines for audit (HEQC, 1994: vi) included an aim to ‘assist institutions in their quest to maintain and enhance the quality of educational provision for students’. However, Brown, (1997a: 5-6) pointed out that these systems in fact embodied two opposing views of this aspect of quality assurance. Audit’s aim was to provide assurance that an institution’s internal quality systems were operating as intended, with an underlying aim of improvement, while assessment’s primary role was to assess the

provision of individual subjects in order to reassure stakeholders that they were maintaining standards and achieving value for money. Power (1994) contrasted audits aimed at ‘verification’ with those intended to encourage improvement while Jackson (1997: 172) emphasised the difference between ‘accountability-led’ and ‘development-led’ mechanisms and the need to reach an appropriate balance between them. In his view, external regulators were mainly concerned with evidence to enable them to reach summative judgements about quality and standards of provision, while those being regulated (i.e. the universities and their staff) would prefer to develop a self-critical approach, identifying areas for improvement and strategies to achieve this. Middlehurst (1997) believed that without this kind of self-motivation, improvement would not go beyond compliance.

Importantly, Brown (1997a: 6) explained that audit as implemented by the HEQC appealed to academics’ ‘internal professional motivation to do better’, whereas HEFCE’s assessment of teaching quality worked on the assumption that quality improvement was most likely to be achieved through a motivation to compete with other institutions. Williams believed that the dual approach was doomed from the implementation of the 1992 Higher Education Act onwards because ‘*audit continued but the stakes were low. Assessment came in and the stakes were very high*’ (I: 9). Audit, which looked at systems, was ‘*fundamentally about improvement through self-knowledge,*’ while assessment was ‘*highly structured and formalised*’ and entailed judgements which could lead to comparison and consequences for funding (I: 9). There was always a difference in tone between the two organisations. In the light of their experience of both academic audit and TQA in their own department, Shore and Wright (1999: 565) confirmed that the former had been conducted in ‘a supportive atmosphere of constructive criticism’ while the latter included an element of ‘competitive ranking’. Sharp agreed with this distinction: ‘*the two would never speak to each other... It was always clear that only one of them would survive and it was a battle for survival*’ (I: 4).

8.2.2 Rising protests

As earlier chapters have shown, some of the protests against the new double burden were on practical grounds, such as frustration expressed by universities at the clashes between audit and assessment visits and the ‘felt overlap’ between information being requested for both (Watson, 1995: 335). Brown (2004: 175) recalled the CVCP conference in September

1993 (only months after the setting up of the systems) where the members had already agreed to work towards reduction of the double processes ‘by seeking a single quality régime under a single quality agency’. Looking back later to this decision he concluded ruefully that ‘almost from the start, HEQC was living on borrowed time’ (Brown, 2004: 44).

The result of a government request to the HEQC and HEFCE for greater cooperation was a *Joint Statement on Quality* (1994) that set out their distinct responsibilities but also described a number of proposals for collaborative activity intended to ‘maximise the effectiveness of their efforts and minimise any duplication of demand on institutions’ (M1/94: 5). In the event, these good intentions were thwarted because the introduction of the TQA scoring system in 1995 led to more pressure on HEFCE staff and greater hostility from academics. Interviewee 2 recalled ‘*an unbelievably complicated grid of things ... I think there are literally over 100 different sorts of things that you were graded about and it just seemed a completely unknown world*’ (I: 2). Watson (1995: 334-335) observed that though the focus of some discussions had moved on, protests from some quarters remained ‘as belligerent (and occasionally hysterical) as ever’ and in particular the ‘continued duality of audit and assessment’ remained a source of considerable frustration. As Sharp commented, ‘*that whole phase was very much the sector feeling that things were being done to them. And I remember going to meetings of the sector towards the end of that phase and the hostility and feelings of injustice at the time were terrifying, palpable*’ (I: 4). Interviewee 10 neatly summarised the division of views that developed within the universities: ‘*some people said, “we don’t want any collective arrangements at all, we’re perfectly happy with what we do.” Another group said, “No, let’s move in the direction of having collective audit arrangements,” ... And there was a third group... which basically said, “if we’re going to do it we might as well do it properly and audit isn’t actually a very effective mechanism for regulating quality. Send HMI in”*’ (I: 10). Although the HEQC’s audits were less strongly resented, the combined burden of the two systems came under ‘almost relentless attack from the institutions and their representatives’ (Watson and Bowden, 1999: 250). Watson (1995: 327) warned that ‘quality’ was in danger of becoming ‘a lightning-rod’ to focus sector-wide opposition to government policy.

8.2.3 Towards a single agency

In his history of quality assurance (2004) Brown gave a detailed account of the uncomfortable progress towards a single system. In June 1994 in response to a crescendo

of protests, the Chairman of the CVCP, Kenneth Edwards, finally wrote to the new Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Shephard, with a proposal to create a single agency with responsibility for all aspects of quality assurance. Several months of wrangling between the CVCP and HEFCE ensued: while many of the vice-chancellors favoured the move to a single agency and a more streamlined system, there was also strong feeling against a 'funding-council controlled system' (Tysome, *THES*, 13 January 1995). Criticisms of this prolonged and public strife came not only from ministers but also from the CVCP's own members. The same issue of the *THES* reported a good deal of support at this stage for quality audit and the HEQC's approach, but as time went on proposals from the HEQC were ignored and the organisation became increasingly marginalised. Brown's account (2004) gives a vivid impression of this discord and the increasing feeling of powerlessness experienced by the HEQC as these events unfolded.

Finally by July 1995, the CVCP and HEFCE reached agreement 'on the principles of a new framework that would incorporate both assessment and audit' which they proposed to Shephard (Brown, 2004: 111). While accepting that these proposals could form the basis for agreement she was 'as adamant as her predecessors about the elements of public accountability that any revised system [would] have to retain' (Watson (1995: 327). She continued to remind the CVCP that the government had the ultimate power over assessment: 'I could not contemplate a solution which relied mainly on self-regulation,' and it remained necessary to ensure 'the benefits of comparability for the Funding Council, potential students and employers' (CVCP Archives, 21 September, 1995).

8.2.4 The Joint Planning Group, January-December 1996

A Joint Planning Group (JPG) was formed in December 1995 by the CVCP and HEFCE consisting of senior representatives of the Funding Councils and university representative bodies from across the UK under the chairmanship of Sir William Kerr Fraser, recently retired Principal of Glasgow University. Notably, the HEQC was not represented in its own right though its chair, John Stoddart, was one of the CVCP members and it had some involvement in the secretariat of the group. The group's remit was 'to draw up specifications for an integrated quality assurance process which [would] supersede the current audit and assessment processes carried out by HEQC and by the Funding Councils' (JPG, 1996: 4). The Group met eight times between January and November 1996 and issued two reports on which it consulted widely. The target was to establish the new

Agency by January 1997 and to have it fully operational from October 1998 (JPG, 1996: 31) so time was tight.

The final report produced in December 1996 proposed the establishment of a single new agency to take over and integrate the functions of audit from the HEQC and assessment from the Funding Councils. It would conduct ‘institution-wide and subject/area programme reviews’, broadly corresponding to the former audit and TQA exercises (JPG, 1996: 9) and all institutions would be subject to an institution-wide review once in each eight-year cycle. The review teams would consist of academic and, where appropriate, professional peers and each review would generate a report published by the agency. Subject/programme area reports were to combine information provided in advance by the institution with evidence collected by the review team, and they would retain the existing scoring system. The institution-wide reviews would focus on ‘an institution’s policies and arrangements for securing its educational objectives, and the management by it of its quality and quality assurance processes’ (JPG, 1996: 18). The double obligation to take account of the universities’ diverse missions while at the same time providing ‘comparable information about institutions and subjects across the sector’ notably retained a central paradox of the quality assurance system.

Service Level Agreements between the institutions and the funding bodies were to be underpinned by a common ‘foundation document’ containing ‘a single statement of the integrated quality assurance process’ (JPG, 1996: 37). Notably the new Board structure would not give control to the universities⁸. The new agency was to take over responsibility for running the Funding Councils’ TQA activities and all of HEQC’s functions from 1 April 1997.

The Group had found it impossible at this early stage to fulfil the part of its remit to ‘determine the costs and perceived benefits of the new arrangements and compare these with present costs and benefits’ and merely tried to postulate some savings from the reduced number of institution-wide reviews in comparison with the previous quality audits (JPG, 1996: 45). This was another example of the previously noted ambiguity about the costs associated with quality assurance. Many of the process details still required to be worked out so the report’s proposals should be seen as ‘a blueprint for the future rather than an operational manual’ (JPG, 1996: 32).

⁸ There were to be 6 independent members including the Chair, 4 members appointed by the representative bodies, and 4 by the Funding Councils, giving a total of 14.

8.2.5 The Quality Assurance Agency

Thus, after an acrimonious debate lasting more than three years, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was incorporated on 27 March 1997 as an independent body to take over the functions of systems audit and teaching quality assessment previously undertaken by the HEQC and the Funding Councils. It was partly funded by annual subscription from universities and colleges and partly through contracts with the Funding Councils. John Randall (formerly Head of Professional Services at the Law Society) was appointed as Chief Executive, with Christopher Kenyon, an industrialist and chair of the Council of the Victoria University of Manchester as its chair. On 1 August the QAA took over all of HEQC's functions and staff, apart from the Chief Executive who was made redundant. Commenting on the end of this long process, Brown (2004: 116) recalled that most institutions who responded to the JPG's final consultation agreed that this report was 'the best that could be achieved in the circumstances'. He identified a kind of 'war weariness' in those who had been involved in the long struggle and were now forced to accept that the Funding Council (with ministerial support) was not going to abandon its insistence on externally imposed assessment.

In some ways it was surprising that the HEQC emerged the loser in this battle. It had, after all, been set up by the CVCP as an organisation owned by the universities themselves and might have been expected to retain their support. However, the Funding Councils, with the power of legislation behind them and control over the funding of universities, were always the more likely victor. In this context, quality assessment was the instrument which provided the government with the means to measure and rank teaching quality and the potential to impose sanctions if necessary (Henkel, 2000). As Harvey (2005: 268) observed, 'audits carried little sanction or prestige, neither money nor reputations were on the line and the language of audits was such that it was hard to spot harsh criticism of institutions'. Salter and Tapper (2000: 77) offered a more political judgement, highlighting the contrast between 'the self-regulatory aspirations of the HEQC and the directive ambitions of the Funding Council', deducing that the former's non-interventionist approach was inadequate to satisfy the demands of 'an aggressive state'.

Though praised by Watson and Bowden (1999: 250) as a 'delicately balanced compromise for a new single system', there was justified concern that the JPG's plans would merely perpetuate audit and assessment under new titles and managed by a single agency. Parry

(2002: 4) pointed out that the JPG had changed the structure but had not got rid of the dual process and gave no concrete promise of savings.

Misgivings continued about the unresolved conflict between the universities' desire for greater self-regulation and the funding councils' continued insistence on close external scrutiny and rigorous subject assessment (Brown, 2004). Yorke (1997) raised a number of reservations about the potential of the JPG's proposals to fulfil the aims of quality assurance. He argued that the proposed eight-year cycle for subject-based assessment reports could allow sub-standard provision to go unidentified and assessment reports would lose their validity over so long a period. Even assuming continuation of the scoring system, it would be difficult to achieve 'consistency and comparability' in the reports given the diversity of university missions against which the universities were to be assessed. He also doubted that potential students would make much use of the information placed in the public domain. He particularly challenged the JPG's lack of evidence to back up the assertion that the new arrangements would produce savings, suggesting instead that they might in fact cost more than the present system. In short, he believed that 'in trying to satisfy a mixture of expectations and a disparate collection of interested parties, the proposed arrangements [were] likely to fall somewhere between a number of stools' (Yorke, 1997: 100).

Time would tell.

8.2.6 Lessons from the 'double whammy'

This episode illustrates a number of points in the turbulent history of quality assurance in the UK. The setting up of separate organisations to deliver quality audit and assessment could be traced back to the 'messiness' of a policy that had not been thought through and predictably proved unworkable. The disputes about quality assurance illustrated a growing gulf between the universities and the government throughout this period. Despite attempts by the CVCP to present a case for self-regulation, this was never a realistic option. In the end it was the personal intervention of Shephard that broke the deadlock in the tortuous progress towards a single agency but she did not deviate from the government's determination to retain external assessment as an essential element of accountability and HEFCE, fortified by legal power and financial control, had the whip-hand in its dealings with the CVCP.

In the resolution of this situation, the government exhibited considerable ruthlessness. After three years of debate, the HEQC, one of the organisations most closely affected by the outcome, was progressively frozen out. According to Brown (2004) once proposals agreed between the CVCP and HEFCE had been accepted by the Secretary of State in September 1995, there was no more debate, the decision was taken as a *fait accompli* and the Joint Planning Group was quickly set up with a remit to make operational plans for the new agency. This view was confirmed by Kelly (I: 3) who attended the first meeting of the JPG and was surprised at the lack of discussion. The QAA was then incorporated with lightning speed by March 1997 and was ready to take over the quality assurance functions of the HEQC and HEFCE by August the same year.

8.3 Quality assurance phase 3, 1997-2001

8.3.1 'Education, education and education'

The inception of the QAA coincided with the coming to power of the New Labour government under Tony Blair. Despite repeated commitment to the primacy of 'education, education and education' his government maintained continuity with many of the Conservative higher education policies. In particular, the Labour Party manifesto had contained a target of an additional 500,000 student places in higher and further education (Shattock, 2012: 162) and an emphasis on service to 'customers' and student choice. League tables provided a means of comparison between universities while quality assurance remained a focus of strife between higher education and the government. Sharp recalled a change in political atmosphere: *'they became much more interested in vaguer ideas to do with public information across a whole variety of different things, and elements of the consumer still – it was very much New Labour'* (I: 4). The main challenges were financial: despite a commitment that '50 percent of those between 18 and 30 should have the opportunity to benefit from higher education by the end of the decade' (DfES 2000: para 17) higher education remained chronically underfunded, with no significant attempt to tackle the budgetary shortfalls until the Higher Education Act of 2004.

8.3.2 Agenda for the QAA

From his inside knowledge of the HEQC, Brown (1997: 272) identified the 'formidable agenda' now facing the new Agency. This included devising a new integrated quality

assurance process, continuing the HEQC's work on the Graduate Standards Programme⁹ and maintaining the volume of information about quality for external stakeholders, while at the same time fulfilling the universities' expectations that both the bureaucratic and financial burdens on them would be reduced.

8.3.3 The Dearing Report, 1997

The new agency had been incorporated just four months before the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) set up by Shephard under the chairmanship of Lord Dearing reported to the new government in July 1997. With a remit to make recommendations for the future of higher education over the next 20 years, the committee's recommendations on quality and standards would therefore have a significant influence on the agenda of the fledgling QAA.

A headline tenet of the Dearing Report's vision for the next 20 years was that 'the future of the UK depends on the quality, effectiveness and relevance of its provision for education and training' (NCIHE, *Summary Report*, 1997: 31). However, though accepting that the TQA had played a useful role in raising the profile of teaching in universities, the Committee expressed serious reservations about the system's potential for the longer term:

'Given that the vast majority of outcomes have been satisfactory, we are not convinced that it would be the best use of scarce resources to continue the system in the long term. We believe it is exceedingly difficult for the TQA process to review the quality of learning and teaching itself, rather than proxies for learning and teaching, such as available resources or lecture presentation. The utility of such a system is also likely to wane as institutions 'learn' how to achieve high ratings' (NCIHE, 1997: 10:68).

While welcoming the establishment of the QAA, therefore, the Committee recommended that the new agency should have 'a somewhat different agenda from that currently proposed' (NCIHE, 1997: 10.82). The aim should be 'the development of common standards, specified and verified through a strengthened external examiner system, supported by a lighter approach to quality assessment' (NCIHE, 1997: 10.68). This approach would greatly depend on the universities providing explicit information to students and employers about the standards and content of their courses, and making clear to all stakeholders what they could expect from higher education.

⁹ A major programme on which the HEQC had been working at the behest of the government.

The Inquiry had identified some concerns that ‘current arrangements for quality assurance [were] not sufficient to ensure comparability of standards in an enlarged sector’ (NCIHE, *Summary Report*, 1997: 15). Diversity of mission in universities should not be ‘an excuse for lower standards or poor quality’ (NCIHE, 1997: 78) but would entail adoption of ‘a national framework of awards with rigorously maintained standards’ (NCIHE, 1997: 1.18). The Committee also recommended that the government should encourage continuity of development rather than continuing the previous pattern of sudden changes in funding or strategy. Improving the quality of teaching and assurance of standards would require a ‘radical change in the attitudes to teaching’ which was currently undervalued and poorly rewarded in comparison with research (NCIHE, *Summary Report*, 1997: 33). To redress this balance, Recommendation 14 proposed the establishment of a professional Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) to accredit training programmes for new full-time staff as well as engaging in research into learning and teaching practices and encouraging the production of innovative learning materials.

Table 8.1: Recommendations of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997)

Recommendation 21:

The provision of appropriate information, support and guidance to students, particularly to include ‘programme specifications’ stating the intended outcomes of their courses and the ‘key skills’ they were expected to attain upon completion

Recommendation 24:

Broadening the QAA’s terms of reference to include:

- Quality assurance and public information
- Standards verification
- The maintenance of the qualifications framework
- Creation of a code of practice which every institution would be required formally to adopt, by 2001/02 as a condition of public funding

Recommendation 25:

Early work of the QAA to include:

- working with institutions to compile benchmark subject information on standards to operate within the qualifications framework
- strengthening the external examiner system by creating a UK-wide pool of academic staff recognised by the QAA from whom external examiners must be selected
- developing a ‘fair and robust’ complaints system
- reviewing arrangements for granting degree-awarding powers

(NCIHE, 1997)

Dearing’s proposals relating to the QAA, expressed in forceful language with short timescales attached, were clearly intended to be taken seriously. Though the overall aim was to maintain the UK’s ‘long-established reputation for quality and standards,’ these

recommendations were also intended to ensure that ‘the need for the apparatus of quality assessment and audit by the Quality Assurance Agency will be correspondingly reduced’ (NCIHE, *Summary Report*, 1997: 50) thus involving a ‘considerably smaller burden on institutions than the existing régime of subject-based quality assessments and institution-wide quality audits’ (NCIHE, 1997: 10.97). Abandonment of the double whammy was thus endorsed.

8.3.4 Quality and funding

The main remit of the Dearing Committee had been to deal with the long-term political hot-potato of student fees. Its report expressed serious concerns about the funding of higher education, identifying a crucial link between the level of underfunding and the quality of provision which the previous government had been unwilling to acknowledge. While universities were justifiably expected to provide value for money, they had given powerful evidence to the Committee that no more cuts were sustainable and additional funding was now needed to maintain the quality of provision (NCIHE, 1997: 3.101). There was an additional concern that the level of financial rewards to high quality research had diverted the attention of staff from the delivery of high quality teaching (NCIHE, *Summary Report*, 1997: 15).

The potential power to use quality assessment as a mechanism for reward or sanction of a university’s performance originally envisaged in the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 had never been implemented in England (Underwood, 2000: 80). Now Dearing’s major recommendation to introduce student fees as a means of increasing the income of universities explicitly reinforced the pressure on universities to provide a high quality education in return for the financial contribution by students once they were in employment. ‘In return for additional contributions from graduates, institutions must make much clearer what they are offering to students. They must work continually to improve the quality of teaching and they must approach the mutual assurance of standards with real commitment. Anything else would be to sell their students short’ (NCIHE, *Summary Report*: 137). The significance of this *quid pro quo* was reinforced in the following paragraph which introduced a note of urgency into the QAA’s work programme: ‘new systems for the assurance of quality and standards must be in place and seen to be effective within a short space of time... If they are not, the Government will be justified in intervening to protect the interests of students’ (NCIHE, *Summary Report*: 138).

Though not accepted in full by the incoming Labour Government in May 1997, Dearing's proposals for the introduction of tuition fees established the principle that students should make a direct contribution to their education, and the Teaching and Higher Education Act (1998) introduced a means-tested fee of a maximum of £1,000 per year. The Dearing proposals relating to quality and standards were accepted by the government in February 1998 and adopted by the universities, thus expanding the QAA's remit and consolidating its position as the single quality assurance agency. In the early days, it used Dearing's proposals as an endorsement of its agenda, as confirmed by Peter Williams (2009: 24) who moved to the QAA as Director of Institutional Review and subsequently became its Chief Executive.

8.3.5 The QAA: a different culture

It was clear from the start that the ethos and *modus operandi* of the QAA would be very different from that of the HEQC whose functions it had largely taken over. This was at least to some extent due to the background and attitudes of the new Chief Executive. John Randall had come to the QAA from a senior post at the Law Society where the formal approach to regulation of professional practice had been very different from the prevailing culture in higher education. The rigour of his '*punish or explain*' kind of approach' (I: 10) incited much resistance in the sector and was seen by many as counter-productive. Sharp understood that Randall's '*harder background*' arose to some extent from his awareness of the potential need for the QAA to have evidence to respond to litigation by students: '*if you were going to make it stick in the courts, you needed to have something against which you could explicitly measure universities*' (I: 4). Randall set out his views in no uncertain terms in an essay entitled *A Profession for the New Millennium?* (2000) asserting his belief that the universities belonged to an out-of-date world which needed to change. Instead the QAA's guidelines should be

‘a code defining professional standards, in that they tell the individual client (the student) and the wider interested public (especially the employer) what they can reasonably expect from a professional service. Universities and their teachers must deliver to those standards if they are to convince the world that they are true professionals’ (Randall, 2000: 166).

An example of his appetite for confrontation occurred in February 1998 when the QAA issued a highly critical report on a special review carried out in response to some serious concerns about quality and standards raised by staff at Thames Valley University. The fact that these problems had not been revealed by previous audit or assessment reports had

undermined public confidence in teaching quality assessments (Harvey, 2005). The ensuing furore received wide press coverage, and eventually resulted in the resignation of the vice-chancellor causing 'shock waves' throughout the sector (Brown, 2004:146).

The QAA's process in implementing the recommendations of both the JPG and the Dearing Committee with an appropriate degree of consultation was protracted. Though Randall was able to report that the first stage of consultation on a new Operational Framework had achieved a 'remarkable degree of consensus' (*THES*, 19 October 1998), friction arose when the *Subject Review Handbook* for October 1998–September 2000 introduced a more punitive scoring mechanism without consulting the sector (Underwood, 2000: 79). When the revised method of 'Academic Review' 'did no more than perpetuate the inherited twin-track model of audit and assessment' (Williams, 2009: 21), it became apparent that the QAA's proposals were likely to be more onerous than before, more contentious within the sector and just as unlikely to justify the costs and the effort (Greatrix, 2001; Brown, 2004; Harvey, 2005). Despite these concerns, the new process of 'Academic Review' was introduced in Scotland in October 2000 and was due to come into force in the rest of the UK the following year (Williams, 2009).

Continuing discontent within the sector led in 2000 to the appointment by HEFCE of management consultants PA Consulting to investigate complaints from the universities about what they considered the excessive bureaucratic and financial burdens of the current 'accountability régime' being carried out by the QAA (HEFCE 00/36: 9). The discovery that neither HEIs nor stakeholders maintained 'any systematic cost or value data' to support their case (HEFCE 00/36: 19) made the review a daunting task: there was 'no simple bottom line to the accountability burden on HEIs,' (HEFCE 00/36: 24). For want of reliable financial information about the costs of quality assessment, the reviewers resorted to building up an admittedly 'indicative picture' (HEFCE 00/36: 20) which allowed them to estimate 'extrapolated annualized costs' of subject assessment for the sector of '£30 million+' (PA Consulting, 2000: 20). Their report, entitled *Better Accountability for Higher in Education*, concluded that the complexity of relationships and lack of understanding between the many stakeholders in higher education had generated unnecessary demands, including costs, which could not reasonably represent value for money. Despite the unreliability of its financial estimates, this report was valuable for its recommendation to simplify the duplications within the system. Brown (2004: 85) surmised that its findings were probably a contributory factor in prompting Blunkett's unexpected intervention to abandon Subject Review in 2001.

8.3.6 ‘Sturm und Drang’¹⁰

Once again tension was rising as the QAA became ‘ever-more controlling in the sector’ (Harvey, 2005: 269) and ‘pressures from the CVCP/Universities UK, élite organisations and letters to the media coagulated to produce the need for political action in relation to Subject Review’ (Morley, 2003: 18). The mounting discontent came to a head in 2001, later described by Williams in a lecture as ‘that extraordinary year when the world of quality assurance was turned upside down’ (Williams, 2009: 21).

At the start of the year, as a contribution to the ongoing debate about student fees, Randall published some contentious ideas that the charging of variable ‘top-up’ fees (then being mooted) might lead to the QAA imposing differential levels of scrutiny on universities to ensure that those charging the highest fees were subject to independent checks to verify their claims to a seat at the top table’ (*THES*, 12 January 2001). Only those institutions acknowledged to be ‘world-class’ (such as Oxford, Cambridge and some of the London institutions) would escape this more rigorous review.

Meanwhile, the new QAA methodology was exposed to serious challenge. A group of six professors of economics at Warwick announced in the *Education Guardian* (30 January 2001) that they had, by their own admission, set out to play the system and achieved the maximum score of 24 out of 24 in a recent review of teaching quality. The announcement was accompanied by a stinging critique of the quality assurance system which they described as ‘probably the most damaging and destructive system of regulation that could possibly have been devised’. They criticised the lack of objectivity, consistency, comparability and cost-effectiveness and were particularly scathing about Randall’s suggestion that ‘the intensity of regulation should rise with the level of fees’ (*Education Guardian*, 30 January 2001).

Discussions took place behind the scenes between Universities UK¹¹ (UUK), HEFCE and the DfEE about the sector-wide discontent and the bureaucratic overload on universities. Meanwhile, in an attempt to incite open revolt within the Russell Group, the London

¹⁰ ‘Sturm und Drang’ (German, literally ‘storm and stress’) was a German literary movement of the latter half of the 18th century, characterised by rousing action and the expression of emotion and unrest. By extension, ‘turbulent emotion or stress’. The title applies appropriately to this disturbed phase in the development of quality assurance in England.

¹¹ The new name of the CVCP from 2000.

School of Economics threatened to break away from QAA scrutiny (*THES*, 23 March, 2001). Protests extended to the Association of University Teachers, the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment and the House of Lords where in a debate on 21 March, peers mounted another attack on the over-bureaucratic and over-complex regulation of teaching in higher education.

Then, suddenly, this rebellion paid off. Without any warning to the QAA, and while the Chairman and Chief Executive were out of the country¹², Blunkett issued a press statement announcing the government's intention to achieve 'a reduction of 40 per cent or more in the volume of review activity compared with existing arrangements,' (DfEE, 2001). HEFCE had already been 'invited' to discuss with the QAA and the university representative bodies how the burden of subject reviews might be reduced while still providing adequate information for prospective students and other stakeholders.

Departments which had achieved high scores in the current round of external reviews would be exempted from the next one, apart from a small number which would be included for benchmarking purposes. Blunkett's action was a further illustration of the power of Ministers to intervene in higher education when it suited them and bore out the warning by Salter and Tapper (2000: 84) that the QAA 'although it stands at arms' length from the state, is clearly intended to be a pliable instrument of ministerial will'.

8.3.7 'Quality assurance in higher education': consultation, 2001

The proposals were taken forward in a key consultation document notably issued by HEFCE rather than the QAA. It began with a re-statement of the objectives of quality assurance of teaching and learning in higher education:

¹² A move compared with 'Commonwealth putsches by discontented colonels when the head of state was away', Donald MacLeod, *Education Guardian*, 23 August 2001.

Table 8.2 Objectives of Quality Assurance (HEFCE, 2001, 01/45)

- To contribute ... to the promotion of high quality and standards in teaching and learning
- To provide students, employers and others with reliable and consistent information about quality and standards in each higher education institution (HEI).
- To ensure that HE programmes are identified where quality or standards are unsatisfactory, as a basis for ensuring rapid action to improve them.
- To provide one means of securing accountability for the use of public funds received by HEIs

HEFCE Consultation Document 01/45, 2001

The consultation document 01/45: paras 7-8 reiterated previous purposes for quality assurance (now called ‘objectives’) but foreshadowed changes to its operation under which confidence that ‘robust and comprehensive internal arrangements’ in the universities could provide sufficient evidence of satisfactory quality when audited by the QAA, thus allowing for a significant reduction in subject review. External scrutiny would now be based on an ‘institution-level review, conducted on audit principles’ to demonstrate ‘the reliability and effectiveness’ of the university’s internal quality assurance arrangements. External reviews at subject level would be carried out ‘only on a highly selective basis’ where there were grounds for concern, which would be the major means of achieving ‘lightness of touch’ (HEFCE, 01/45: para 10b). All universities would be audited on a regular cycle by audit teams operating on peer review principles (HEFCE, 01/45: para 18) with self-evaluation as the starting point. There was also a proposal to carry out a small number of ‘discipline audit trails’ in specific subjects as a way of testing and confirming the conclusions reached during the overall review (HEFCE, 01/45: para 25).

A task group led by Sir Ron Cooke, Vice-Chancellor of York University, was appointed to identify the categories of information relating to quality and standards which universities would be expected to produce regularly, drawing where possible on already available data (HEFCE, 01/45: paras 13 and 42) together with a statement of the confidence that could be placed in the university’s safeguarding of quality and standards and in the reliability of information it published. The burden of information demanded from universities as part of the quality assurance process had certainly not diminished. Indeed the list of requirements listed by Brown (2004: 178-180) in an Appendix runs to three pages.

After each institution-wide audit, the audit team would publish a report identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the university’s internal quality assurance systems and the

quality and standards achieved in practice. This report would include a statement of the confidence that could be placed in the university's quality and standards systems distinguishing between 'failing', 'approved' or 'commended' and on the reliability of its published information (HEFCE, 01/45: para 43). If necessary the QAA would revisit the university within a year to assess progress and if it was still found to be 'failing', HEFCE would withdraw funding (HEFCE, 01/45: para 45). The paper expressed confidence that the volume of review activity would be very substantially reduced: if working effectively, this new system should be able to exceed the Secretary of State's target by achieving a reduction of 'at least 50 per cent' (HEFCE, 01/45: para 51).

On the other hand, in an article written in 2002, Parry (2002: 3) examined the proposals contained in the consultation document 01/45, reflecting that the chequered history of quality assurance provided 'a cautionary note for anyone attempting to predict the implications, even the lifespan, of any new arrangements'. While he was prepared to give the consultation document 'a cautious welcome' as an attempt to lighten the load of external quality assurance on institutions and welcomed the statement that each university would have responsibility for its own internal quality assurance systems, he took issue with claims that the new arrangements would deliver this level of reduction in quality assurance activity. He believed that the criteria for assessment remained vague and foresaw continuing tension between the aims of accountability and enhancement. He criticised the lack of costings and wondered whether this model of review could be rigorous enough to identify failures and ensure remedial action.

There was no possibility that Randall could have accepted these proposals which he saw as a watering down of subject-level scrutiny and a reduction in timeliness and validity of the course information which would be available to students. On 28 August 2001, recognising that his personal position was untenable, he resigned, bemoaning the lack of rigour that would result from these changes and urging that the public should be entitled to 'hear less about the burdens of accountability and more about its benefits' (*Education Guardian*, 28 August, 2001). To many members of the academic community, his resignation came as a relief. 'Good news!' exclaimed Frank Furedi at the start of an article in the *Education Guardian* (28 August, 2001). However, on reflection, he wondered whether the Chief Executive's resignation would in fact make much difference because this would not be the end of the quality assurance régime developed over the previous decade which 'remains intact and dominates academic life'. As he saw it, 'universities [had] internalised the

bureaucratic formula and almost every university [had] its in-house quality assurance bureaucracy' which would continue to promote the QAA's approach.

After some minor modifications the proposals in the consultation document 01/45 received ministerial approval and an 'Operational Description' (QAA/019) of the process was published by the QAA in March 2002 to guide implementation of the new system.

8.3.8 The QAA Mark 2

Although the QAA took part in these discussions and was listed among the sponsors¹³ of the consultation paper, Williams (2009: 22) felt that this process had 'effectively spelt the end of QAA's autonomy' by handing over control of the consultation on the future of quality assurance systems to HEFCE. The QAA's *Academic Review Handbook* (2000), even before it had been implemented in England, was superseded by this new document which was billed merely as a 'further evolution in the approach to quality,' (HEFCE, 01/45: para 6) but in fact proposed very significant changes (Parry, 2002).

After Randall's resignation, Williams took over as acting Chief Executive¹⁴ and many other changes of personnel took place. In a period of high activity a new audit process was devised to meet the requirements of the consultation document and a new *Handbook for Institutional Audit* was published in August 2002 setting out agreed procedures for 2002–05. By October, new auditors had been recruited and trained in the new audit method and the programme of Institutional Audits began in January 2003 (JM Consulting, 2005: 3.10). JM Consulting Ltd (2005: 3.9) reported that QAA's annual turnover was approximately £10m. It employed about 130 staff and retained a pool of approximately 300 auditors drawn from UK academics and trained by the QAA to work on Institutional Audit and other activities. Individual reviewers were paid by QAA but 'without direct recompense' to their universities.

The new arrangements for quality assurance (shown in Table 3.11, page 62) were based on the principle that universities should have the main responsibility for assessing and assuring the quality of their own provision, thus reducing the external burden. They therefore retained their long-established internal systems of course approval, annual

¹³ The consultation document was issued in the names of HEFCE, the QAA, UUK and the Standing Conference of Principals, and the return address was given as the headquarters of the QAA.

¹⁴ He was confirmed in the post in March 2002.

programme monitoring, periodic departmental reviews and student evaluation of courses as well as review of students' work by external examiners. Nevertheless, the *Quality Assurance Framework* which replaced the former régime of audit and assessment consisted of a number of externally specified elements including a 6-yearly cycle of Institutional Audits by the QAA which included published reports stating levels of confidence and recommendations. National information on standards was collected into an *Academic Infrastructure* (as recommended by Dearing) which included a *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications*, benchmark statements defining degree standards for different disciplines, institutional programme specifications and A *Code of Practice* to guide universities in the assessment of their own programmes. The 2003 White Paper announced new information requirements for internal and external use and the establishment of a National Student Survey (NSS) to seek students' views on the own courses.

Williams said in his interview for this study that in his experience '*after 2002, QAA was not allowed to decide what it was going to do: it simply became a creature of government, a creature of the unholy pact between the Funding Council and the UK and there was not a lot we could do about that*' (I: 9). With hindsight, Shattock (2012: 204) interpreted Blunkett's intervention as a sign of how little autonomy the QAA ever actually had: 'when the political chips were down' ministers did not hesitate to intervene directly and the detail in Blunkett's press statement had indicated how closely the Department for Education and Employment was involved. Furthermore, the temptation for ministers to interfere in quality assurance continued, for at the start of 2002 Margaret Hodge, Minister for Higher Education, who did not consider that the new 'lighter touch' system was sufficiently rigorous, intervened to reverse some processes (*THES*, 22 February, 2002). Williams' prediction of QAA's loss of power was proving to be well-founded.

8.4 Quality assurance phase 4, 2002-04

8.4.1 Tuition fees - 'a troubled process'¹⁵

With the rise in participation rates from 13% of 18-19-year-olds in 1980/81 to 34% in 1999/2000 (Greenaway and Haynes, 2003: 152), concerns about how to fund the greatly expanded higher education sector had become a problem for successive governments. As Figure 1 on p. 57 illustrates, cuts to the higher education budget meant that the expenditure

¹⁵ A phrase coined by Tony Blair himself in his autobiography (2010: 481).

per student had halved over the same period. In the mid-1980s initial attempts by Keith Joseph to bring forward proposals to extend means testing to tuition fees and abolish the minimum level of maintenance grants were supported by the Treasury but provoked a major backbench revolt. Thatcher and later Major took the line that these ideas were too politically unpopular to introduce and the result was ‘a decade of under-funded expansion, imposed ‘efficiency gains’ and a growing dependence on international student fee income’ (Shattock, 2012: 161).

Increasingly acute awareness that standards of education could no longer be maintained without an increase in funding led ‘a group of politically experienced post-1992 vice-chancellors’ to pursue their efforts to effect change (Shattock, 2012: 133). Through the CVCP archives Shattock traced the escalation of pressure from a proposal in January 1995 for ‘top up’ fees independently set by the universities themselves to a direct threat by universities in February 1996 to impose a ‘special levy’ unilaterally if the government did not act. To de-fuse this tension and with neither of the major political parties being willing to support tuition fees ahead of a general election, Shephard passed the buck to the Dearing Committee to come up with a solution for the next government to deal with (Tapper and Salter, 1998).

8.4.2 Top-up fees

It was clear to universities that fees of £1,000 per year were inadequate to make up the shortfall in funding, particularly in the light of the expressed government intention ‘to continue to increase participation towards 50 per cent of those between 18 and 30’ (DfES, 2003 Executive Summary, p. 7). In particular, the most highly rated research universities pressed for the right to charge higher fees at what they considered a market rate to enable them to maintain the quality to compete internationally and the argument then moved to a debate about variable tuition fees (otherwise known as ‘top up’ fees).

8.4.3 Intervention to protect quality

Interestingly, at the centre of this political debate was again a concern about quality, but this time viewed from the point of view of a small number of élite institutions, and what once again made the difference was personal intervention, this time from an unexpected quarter which illustrated New Labour’s way of doing business.

In this case (as recounted by Shattock, 2012) the issue was how the UK's 'top' universities could be well enough resourced to maintain their international reputation against foreign competition. This issue had been privately brought to the attention of the Prime Minister by Lord Jenkins, Chancellor of Oxford, and former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, supported by Blair's senior policy advisor, Andrew Adonis. The argument was reinforced in 2001 by a visit of members of the Russell Group to Downing Street to put the case for more funding. As reported dramatically by Blair (2010: 483): 'once the university chiefs laid out the problem I knew we had to act'. Despite the potential unpopularity of introducing variable tuition fees he believed that this change would lay the foundation for future reforms and was specifically linked to the future prestige of UK universities on the world stage. Characteristically focusing on the bigger picture, he was therefore prepared to promote this cause personally despite recognising a political risk. Observing the pre-eminence of American universities in the Shanghai Jaio Tong league table top 50 which contained only 'a handful' of UK institutions, Blair was convinced that their domination was

'not by chance or by dint of size; it was plainly and inescapably due to their system of fees. They were more entrepreneurial; they went after their alumni and built up big endowments; their bursary system allowed them to attract poorer students; and their financial flexibility meant that they could attract the best academics. Those who paid top dollar got the best. Simple as that' (Blair, 2010: 482).

8.5 2003 White Paper: *'The Future of Higher Education'*

8.5.1 Financial proposals

The depth of the Prime Minister's conviction on this particular issue paved the way for a White Paper published in January 2003 by the new Secretary of State, Charles Clarke. Its proposals included the introduction of tuition fees payable retrospectively through an income-dependent Graduate Contribution Scheme. This solution was intended to put university finances 'on a sustainable basis' for the long term. (DfES, 2003: 5). From 2006 the scheme would allow universities to charge up to £3,000 per year, funded by a student loan from the government to be repaid after graduation.

As table 8.3 demonstrates, the main thrust of the White Paper was financial, with the planned increases representing 'an unprecedented investment' in universities (DfES, 2003: 8). However, government investment would not be sufficient to fund the desired improvements, so the student contribution would be essential.

**Table 8.3: Summary of the spending review settlement for HE in England
(from *White Paper: The Future of Higher Education*, DfES, 2003: 19)**

Summary of the Spending Review Settlement for Higher Education in England (£million)					
	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	per cent Increase in in cash terms 05-06 over 02-03
Research*	1,910	2,144	2,318	2,633	38
of which capital*	256	364	453	453	77
Knowledge transfer*	62	82	101	114	84
Teaching and learning	3,943	4,230	4,604	4,963	26
of which capital	155	207	377	442	185
Expansion	0	9	21	32	
Access and widening participation	86	119	130	132	53
Management, leadership, and strategic development	15	23	32	34	127
Student support**	1,578	1,691	1,839	1,996	26
Other	2	11	12	14	
Total recurrent	7,185	7,738	8,227	9,023	
Total capital	411	571	830	895	
Grand Total	7,596	8,309	9,057	9,918	31

* Including estimates of the amount of the Office of Science and Technology's UK wide funding that is likely to go to HE institutions in England. These estimates are forward projections based on spending in previous years by OST and the OST Research Councils.

** Estimated share of student support likely to go on HE student domiciled in England. These estimates are based on the most recent data from the Student Loans Company.

Underlying the financial proposals in the 2003 White Paper, therefore, was a professed government commitment to improving quality. Importantly, justification for this large increase in spending on higher education was based on the premise that after ‘decades of under-investment’ higher education was ‘under pressure and at risk of decline’ (DfES, 2003: 4). Echoing the Dearing Report, this amounted to a rarely expressed admission by government that quality had suffered as a result of cuts in funding. The UK was investing less than its international competitors in terms of percentage of GDP (DfES, 2003: 1.12) to the extent that the backlog of investment in teaching and research facilities was estimated at £8 billion. The White Paper (1: 19) accepted that the decline in staff:student ratios from 1:10 in 1983 to 1:18 in 2000 had resulted in a decline in small classes and face-to-face contact between staff and students, deteriorating infrastructure and shortage of teaching resources which inevitably had the potential ‘to degrade the learning experience and threaten the quality of education’ (Greenaway and Haynes, 2003: 154). A large increase in funding for research was therefore to be accompanied by a significant investment in teaching which was acknowledged to have been for too long the ‘the poor relation in higher education,’ (DfES, 2003: 1.18).

In supporting these proposals over a protracted period, Blair encountered strong opposition from his Secretary of State, Estelle Morris (who resigned over the issue), from many members of the Labour Party and, until very late in the day, from the Chancellor, Gordon Brown. Blair's majority in the House of Commons debate on 27 January 2004 was reduced to 5, with 71 Labour members voting against and 19 abstaining.

8.5.2 A vision for higher education

As well as introducing the proposals for variable tuition fees, the 2003 White Paper spelt out the Labour government's vision for higher education in the UK. Notably, even in the sixth year of the Blair government, rather than embarking on major changes, it reiterated many priorities of the previous Conservative governments. In a speech at Greenwich Maritime University in February 2000, Blunkett had announced a new government aim to ensure that 'half of all young people benefit from higher education by the age of thirty'. There was a continued emphasis on maintaining the UK's international research competitiveness, particularly through support to science and technology, and the importance of higher education's contribution to the economy through retaining links with industry, now referred to as 'harnessing knowledge to wealth creation' (DfES, 2003, *Foreword*: 2). The quality of higher education remained a major concern and the White Paper signalled a number of themes which would become prominent in the future quality assurance agenda.

8.5.3 *Learning from Subject Review* (QAA, 2003)

The emphasis on evaluating quality assurance systems as an aspect of accountability had continued. The QAA's contractual obligations required the agency to report annually to HEFCE on the outcomes of subject review and institutional audit, highlighting emerging themes and trends and judgements about the state of quality and standards in higher education. The QAA's formal self-evaluation and monitoring processes included collecting feedback from student representative bodies, institutions and auditors who had participated in their reviews. It also consulted with the sector on changes of process and from time to time published more substantial reports, such as *Learning from Subject Review, 1993-2001* (QAA, 2003) a comprehensive report on the seven rounds of teaching quality assessments between 1993 and 2001 (later known as subject reviews) which attempted to assess 'the large scale impact of the process and the results that it delivered for the sector as a whole'

(QAA, 2003: 2). Paul Clark, HEFCE's Director of Quality Assessment, commented on 'the scale and audacity of the venture' which had entailed 2,904 subject reviews in 62 subject areas with an overview report published for each subject area. As an indication of the quality of higher education, the Foreword emphasised that the overwhelming majority of subject provision had been approved and the report went on to identify a number of beneficial impacts on higher education. It claimed that as a result of the new quality assurance systems the universities had become 'more self-critical and adopted a more systematic and rigorous approach to the design and delivery of HE programmes' (QAA, 2003: 4). There was evidence of a growing strategic approach to curriculum and resource planning and the reports showed that teaching and learning strategies were becoming more common, learning outcomes were more clearly defined and there was significant innovation in teaching and learning. The dissemination of good practice had been promoted by the publication of subject review reports and the influence of subject reviewers within their own institutions. There was greater response to the increasingly diverse needs of students and the figures for degree class awards indicated higher levels of attainment.

Certain aspects of provision, however, were less positively reviewed. Many reports had criticised universities for lack of clarity in defining their aims and objectives and stating clear learning outcomes. Assessment practices came in for some serious criticisms and were seen as the area in most need of improvement. Positive judgements about the external examiner system were outnumbered by frequently expressed concerns in subject overview reports. In some places, learning resources such as library services and IT equipment were under great pressure, and sub-standard teaching accommodation and overcrowding often compromised the quality of teaching and learning. The inadequacy of statistical information required by reviewers for tracking the progression of students also gave rise to problems. In terms of quality management procedures, deficiencies in the internal processes required for the monitoring, review and evaluation of the quality of student learning often received adverse comment. There was evidence of lack of involvement by staff and students in the quality assurance processes which resulted in 'little commitment, sense of ownership or of high priority given to the process' (QAA, 2003: 50). A serious issue frequently noted by reviewers was inadequate recording of recommendations contained in subject reviews. This resulted in long delays in remedial action being taken which was clearly to the detriment of learning. There was general evidence that student views were taken seriously, though in a significant number of cases completed student questionnaires were not analysed and there was little or no feedback to students.

8.5.4 Government concern with quality

Throughout the 2003 White Paper, the government was anxious to show itself as a safeguarder and promoter of quality. It was claimed that the threefold increase in graduates over the past two decades had been achieved ‘while safeguarding quality’ (DfES, 2003: 4) and the policy for continued expansion would not be accompanied by a ‘compromise on quality’ (DfES, 2003: 7). The aim was to support improvements in teaching quality in all universities: ‘high quality teaching must be recognised and rewarded, and best practice shared’ (DfES, 2003: 7).

In practical terms this commitment was translated into a number of proposals relating to teaching quality, staff development and student choice. Training for all university teachers was to be established on the basis of ‘new national professional standards for teaching in higher education’ (DfES, 2003: 46) and, building on the existing ILTHE, the creation of a ‘Teaching Quality Academy’ to support continuous professional development. External examiners were also to receive improved training and induction, with a proposal for a national programme by 2004-05.

Recent evidence of ‘a worrying rise in unfilled vacancies across the university workforce’ (DfES, 2003: 4.20) had already led to recognition of the need to increase pay but, to academics’ disappointment, this did not amount to an across-the-board rise in salaries: it was to be conditional on ‘better pay differentiation for teachers, with institutions rewarding those who teach well’ (DfES, 2003: 4.23). This link between pay and performance was in keeping with the aim to reward ‘excellence’ through individual rewards to ‘truly outstanding individual teachers’ (DfES, 2003: 4.27) and the award of significant extra funding to departments designated ‘Centres of Teaching Excellence’.

8.5.5 Student choice

The ideas in the White Paper relating to quality and choice amounted to a fully-fledged reiteration of the consumerist philosophy linking back to the Charter initiative of the Major government in the early 1990s. The concept that ‘student choice will increasingly work to drive up quality’ (DfES, 2003: 46), repeated several times, was here reinforced by the idea that now that students were being asked to contribute to the costs of their education, ‘their expectations of quality will rise’ (DfES, 2003: 4.1). A further feature of this consumer framework was the proposal to strengthen the mechanism for student complaints.

The apogee of consumer rhetoric was reached in section 4.13 of the White Paper under the heading ‘Ensuring universal good provision’ which amounted to an obligation on providers of education to offer a *guarantee* of quality: ‘All students have the right to good teaching ... so as well as making sure that students can make well-informed choices, we must seek to guarantee good-quality teaching for everyone’.

There followed a list of daunting commitments for academics and employers:

‘This means being clearer about the teaching and learning standards and practices that students and government, as the principal funders, have a right to expect from all higher education providers. All providers should set down their expectations of teachers with reference to national professional standards; should ensure that staff are trained to teach and continue to develop professionally; should have effective quality assurance systems and robust degree standards; and should value teaching and reward good teachers’ (DfES, 2003: 4.13).

8.5.6 The future of quality assurance

The White Paper had also endorsed the recent changes in its processes which were intended to ‘reduce the burden on higher education institutions’ by relying more on the universities’ own systems (DfES, 2003: 4.15). Based on the ‘principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success’ intensive scrutiny would be restricted to cases where problems had arisen. According to the comments on academics’ attitudes to quality assurance in the JM Consulting Report (2005) this had largely succeeded. Nevertheless, the familiar threat of a link between quality assessment and funding remained: ‘achievement of satisfactory outcomes from QAA review systems [would] be expected of all institutions in receipt of block teaching grant’ (DfES, 2003: 4.15) Despite its claim to be presenting a vision of ‘a freer future’, there was a clear message that the government would continue to intervene ‘when [not ‘*if*’] universities [failed] to provide adequate opportunities or when access, quality or standards [were] at risk’ (DfES, 2003:1.43) and the reference to ‘guarantees’ did not raise much expectation of a more relaxed approach.

8.5.7 The Higher Education Act (2004)

Despite a difficult passage through Parliament because of its controversial proposals on fees, the Higher Education Act became law on 1 July 2004. Several of its other themes – the quality of teaching and rewards for excellence, student choice and competition, and the

provision of information on which to base their decisions did much to set the direction for the QAA throughout the next decade.

8.6 Summary

The narrative of this chapter has illustrated the volatility of quality assurance in the period between the Higher Education Acts of 1992 and 2004. A repeated pattern developed in which mounting discontent among academics reached crisis level, provoking ministerial intervention and leading to radical change. In each case, there had been an external source of provocation: the ill-considered imposition of the ‘double whammy’ of audit and assessment, compounded by the introduction of numerical scoring from 1995; the increasingly authoritarian culture promoted by the new leadership of the fledgling QAA; and belated political acknowledgement of the negative effects of underfunding on quality with consequent anxieties about the international reputation of UK higher education.

Apart from exacerbating an already widening rift between higher education and government during this period, these conflicts had a number of damaging outcomes for the quality agenda. The abolition of the HEQC meant the loss of its strongly developmental approach to quality improvement and the involvement of academics in its work. There were also disadvantages in the loss of autonomy by the QAA after 2001, which made it increasingly subject to political influence. Though securing the funding of higher education, the introduction of student fees was politically controversial and had profound effects on the lives of students and the relationships with their teachers.

CHAPTER 9: WORKING WITH QUALITY ASSURANCE – EFFECTS ON STAFF

‘The assessment and management of quality in higher education seems to arouse enthusiasm and cynicism in equal measure’ (Brennan and Shah, 2000: 1).

9.1 Introduction: The management of change

From 1992 onwards, universities and individual academics had to learn how to operate in a new and complex world, to understand the ways of politicians and the language of civil servants and to attempt to influence the policy-makers for their own advantage, often in the glare of publicity. At the same time, they had to find their place in the new internal hierarchies in universities and forge new relationships among managers, administrators and peers. This chapter analyses the practical and psychological effects of quality assurance on the lives and work of academics.

Newton (2002: 154) warned policy makers to avoid relying on ‘planned change’ but rather to acknowledge the unpredictable nature of ‘emergent change’ and its potential for unforeseen consequences. Quality assurance, as an instrument of policy enforcement, was subject to these uncertainties. Gordon (1993) had reflected on the radical nature of the higher education reforms of the early 1990s and their probable impacts on staff:

‘The literature on cultural change in organisations suggests that the initial phase is usually one of denial. (Why us? Is it necessary/relevant?) If adequate attention is paid to explanations, if care is taken to ensure that the innovation is appropriate to the stated needs and is achievable and is adequately resourced, then the phase of adoption and embedding follows. Thereafter, it is usually argued, there is a need to revise the cultural values of the organization to assimilate the development as the new standard for operational practice’ (Gordon, 1993: 18).

This kind of carefully planned incremental approach was certainly not applied to the introduction of quality assurance: *‘part of the difficulty in the 90s was that this was new, it was different, it was perceived to be threatening’* (Williams, I: 9). By 1993, therefore, Holmes (1993: 5) was already commenting on the cumulative strain for academics of the

‘sustained period of change which has been both wide-ranging and challenging, impinging on all areas of their activity and requiring individuals, groups, departments and institutions to consider the very nature, character and even the potential demise of their present activities’.

Harvey (1995: 131) drew attention to ‘scepticism and cynicism’ among academics in settings where this ‘necessary groundwork’ had not been done to gain their assent to new developments such as the attempted introduction of Total Quality Management in a small number of institutions which had a seriously divisive impact on relationships between management and departmental staff. Even though the initial shock of the externally imposed quality assurance régime wore off, for many staff the pressures in the increasingly complex higher education sector had not reduced with time. The atmosphere of constant upheaval induced a feeling of ‘policy fatigue’ across the sector (Morley, 2003: 59). Henkel (2000) confirmed that, though some academics recognised the benefits of quality assurance, many continued to view it negatively, as one element in a series of largely unwelcome changes besetting higher education. The personal consequences of these tensions took some time to manifest themselves but turned out to have important long-term effects on universities and the people who worked in them.

9.2 Focus on frontline academics

9.2.1 Research on quality assurance

As the cumulative effects of these stresses gradually emerged, the impacts of managing quality as perceived ‘through the eyes of ordinary academic staff’ became a focus for research (Brennan and Shah, 2000: 140). In her study of academic identities and policy change, Henkel (2000) used the introduction of quality assurance as a case study to illustrate the effects of the radical higher education reforms of the 1980s and 90s on universities and their staff. Focusing her survey of academics at ‘macro, meso and micro’ levels, she noted that, depending on institutional culture, either the central management of quality assurance in universities might reduce the strength of departments or, conversely, the experience of subject assessment might increase the *esprit de corps* among departmental colleagues. Clearly some staff with experience as assessors or who had been involved in preparation for quality audit or assessment might take a more favourable view. Henkel observed that the early debates about quality assurance had mainly taken place at national level, raising major issues about the principle of academic autonomy, the breakdown of trust between government and universities and the definition of quality itself. For most academics involved in it, the TQA had been ‘a dramatic intervention in their working lives, dominating the semester or term in which it occurred, and the whole academic year for those with responsibilities for organising it... It was a feature of the

horizons within which academics worked' (Henkel, 2000: 97). Despite the public clashes of the quality debate, however, the views of academics at faculty and departmental level had been 'relatively muted' early on (Henkel, 2000: 83) and to fill this gap the second part of her study, drew information from interviews with academics, managers and administrators from various levels.

9.2.2 The 'implementation gap'

Many reports and evaluations of quality assurance tended to adopt a management perspective promoting messages supportive of quality assurance: protests of front-line staff were largely ignored or not taken seriously and not much attention was paid to those who attempted to argue against it. Kogan and Hanney (2000: 29) commented on the frequent assumption by policy makers that 'target groups can be counted on to act as if they are subject to no other influences than the policy itself'. The belief that 'once the hard job of policy-making is done they can send out the finished documents and wait for results' often leads to a gross underestimate of the need to support policy implementation at grassroots level (Trowler, 2002: 17). Such assumptions are frequently accompanied by a lack of understanding that their policies will be 'received and interpreted differently in different contexts according to institutional context, history and environment' (Trowler, 2002: 17). At departmental level varied interpretations of quality assurance guidance often resulted in divergent rather than uniform practice, vividly described by Trowler (2002: 5) as 'the rough terrain that is missed by the large-scale maps'. The 'implementation gap' between official guidance prescribed by the Funding Councils and the QAA and the varying interpretations by staff at local level often led to what Ball (1994:10) described as the 'wild profusion of local practice'. The erratic development of quality assurance itself with frequent changes of government priorities, alterations in methodology and revisions in terminology inevitably proved confusing and demotivating for academics. As Trowler (1998: 151) commented, 'actors at the ground level are as likely to adapt policy as to adopt it, to shape and re-shape it as they implement it'.

The difficulties and tensions that arose during the implementation of quality assurance in universities, were a classic example of 'this strange selective blindness of formal policy makers' (Trowler, 2002: 18) but it took some time for the views of front-line staff to become the focus of serious analysis. In an effort to supplement the 'one-dimensional nature of previous thinking', Trowler's edited volume, *Higher Education Policy and*

Institutional Change (2002) included chapters analysing the effects of policy change on departments and individual academics, including the impact of quality assurance. With a similar purpose in mind, Newton (2000 and 2002) reported on two stages of a ‘close-up study’ of developing quality assurance procedures in a higher education college, analysing how academics sought to make sense of ‘the quality revolution’ and how it affected their lives.

9.3 Impacts on working lives

9.3.1 Workers in the ‘quality industry’

The effects of quality assurance systems on staff gradually became apparent through the 1990s. As chapter 6 pointed out, the quality assurance ‘industry’ created new career opportunities and some staff responded positively to the results-oriented challenges of ‘performativity’. By the end of the 1990s, Henkel (2000) recognised that there were potential advantages in pedagogical and organisational terms and Barnett welcomed the fact that the focus on teaching quality had contributed to a variety of new teaching-related opportunities for staff such as *‘teacher scholars, teacher researchers, curriculum managers, that sort of thing so there are more and more possibilities for people who want to become serious professionals interested in teaching in higher education’* (I: 8).

On the other hand, many of the initial causes of resentment identified in chapter 7 had continued. Hart (1997: 295) argued that the UK obsession with ‘quality of provision’ which had spread from industry and business to the public sector had come to dominate the universities, with often negative results. For Morley (2002: 126) the continuing culture change that had occurred in universities over the previous decade meant that ‘higher education [was] being repositioned as an industry, rather than as a social institution’ and academics were being compelled to work in a culture where knowledge was becoming a commodity and ‘production metaphors, borrowed from industry, [were] now central to higher education discourse’. As Trowler (2002: 19) summed up, ‘a power struggle is going on as academic labour is subjected to intensification and scrutiny in a context where knowledge is increasingly commodified so that higher education bears ever-closer resemblance to a production facility’.

Further reflection now allowed commentators such as Knight and Trowler (2000) to identify two differing types of quality assurance with similar aims but based on different

ideologies. In their analysis, Type I (the 'industrial' model of quality assurance focusing on efficiency and measurement) could work when applied to 'human operations that are well-defined, repeatable and stable', such as 'the telesales centre, the burger bar, the assembly-line, production plant and military contexts which require high reliability'. It might also be applicable to some 'maintenance functions' in higher education, such as processing admissions or maintaining student data, but it was highly unsuitable for the work of most teaching staff which was non-routine, complex and dependent on a high level of communication skills. The type I approach to quality risked producing 'bored and alienated workers' (Knight and Trowler, 2000: 112). In order to flourish, academic activity required a different approach (Type II) emphasising effective teaching and learning, with processes based on trust, designed to encourage creativity, self-fulfilment and interaction and leaving room for flexibility and change.

The current study has emphasised that the impacts of quality assurance could differ markedly between different institutions and different staff groups. Vice-chancellors might recognise the potential benefits of quality assurance for teaching and for stricter management of staff, while academics at department level resisted the externally imposed monitoring systems. Intermediate grades such as heads of department, who might be combining their teaching responsibilities with management roles, were caught in the middle. A survey of 17 heads of department by Johnson (2002: 82) demonstrated that their own resistance to change, coupled with that of the academics in their departments, made them reluctant to depart from the 'norms and traditions in the nature and purpose of academic work'. Some welcomed the fact that their responsibilities for quality assessment empowered them to raise the profile of teaching within their departments and to promote staff development, but others now saw themselves uncomfortably caught between calls for greater efficiency and higher productivity from senior university managers and antagonism from junior colleagues who resented the impositions of quality assurance on their time.

Because policy implementation depended on 'the lived practices, experiences and understandings of actors in context', Johnson (2002: 105) took issue with contemporary management methods which tended to 'assume the effectiveness of financial levers, and draw on an ideologically driven, technical rational framework of change relationships'. The challenges of managing and motivating academics required persuasion not compulsion. Morley (2003: vi) was sufficiently concerned about the effects of quality assurance on individuals to set up her own study of the views of academics and administrators in 36 UK institutions in order to explore 'the power relations that organize and facilitate quality assurance in higher education'.

9.3.2 Divisive effects of quality assurance

The recruitment of staff with skills required by the quality industry gained pace through the 1990s: Morley (2003: 97) scathingly described quality assurance as a ‘job creation scheme’ and one of her respondents commented on the numbers of specialist staff brought in ‘specially to get better points on QAA’ (Morley, 2003: 38). As another of her interviewees described, this trend had resulted in a bewildering hierarchy of new posts, titles and relationships: ‘We have a pro-vice chancellor whose title is quality assurance, or some such. The pro-vice chancellor chairs a committee which is called the academic quality committee, which consists of a number of individuals but particularly of the deans of academic quality in each of the faculties. And each of the faculties has an academic quality committee, which the associate dean presides over’ (Morley, 2003: 65).

Academics and support staff at departmental level could take a different view from senior managers and external quality monitoring agencies on its positive or negative effects. As quality assurance became more important for the universities’ reputations, administrators might welcome the opportunity to gain influence through use of their technical skills. For example, Morley (2003: 103) cited situations where management meetings took precedence over lectures. Indeed from early on, some academics began to recognise a growing premium on managerial and administrative ability and ‘struggled to gain status through the adoption of managerial roles’ (Holmes, 1993: 5), though many saw this as incompatible with their academic values (Henkel 2000). Understandably, the increase in the numbers of non-teaching staff caused considerable resentment, particularly in a context where 52% of academic staff were appointed on fixed-term or other insecure contracts by 1994/95 (Kogan and Hanney, 2000: 80) and their incomes were declining in relation to other professions.

The appointment of new administrators to co-ordinate quality assessment processes from the centre did not mean, however, that front-line academics were released from the burdens of administration. Instead, the computerisation of university information systems, while adding to efficiency, had been accompanied by a significant reduction in clerical support for teaching staff who were then expected to respond to many central demands for the collection and transfer of information, including statistics to inform the teaching quality assessments. As a respondent to a 1998 survey commented, ‘the introduction of computers

and subsequent electronic communication has given a licence to reduce secretarial support. This means that academic staff do their own clerical work as well as administration and academic work' (Kinman and Jones, 1998: 29). The result was that, whether they liked it or not, many 'became part of the bureaucracy' (Henkel, 2000: 63). Within the new structures many academics were unprepared for the expanding management roles they were required to take on for which they were 'not only ill suited, but also not trained' Kinman and Jones (2003: 31).

Some saw the TQA as a predominantly bureaucratic process in which 'professional values of responsibility, responsiveness, and individualisation were being replaced by administrative systems, which might provide the form rather than the reality of accountability and substantive quality' (Henkel, 2000: 99). Indeed, the result of an assessment could depend on the quality of a department's paperwork rather than the quality of the teaching.

9.3.3 Workload

The pressures of quality assurance on workload and time continued to figure among the most constant and persistent complaints from academics (Henkel, 2000, Newton, 2002, Morley, 2003). Interviewee 6 in the present study remembered that even at the end of the 1990s some academics from pre-92 universities were still complaining about the amount of course documentation required. Quoting figures from a survey commissioned by the Association of University Teachers (AUT, Court, 1996) Morley pointed out that between 1987 and 1993 alone (which covered the merger of pre-92 and post-92 universities) student numbers had risen by 50% to more than a million full-time equivalents, while academic staff numbers had gone up by only 15% to 72,000. Falling staff:student ratios had inevitably raised teaching hours and class sizes while at the same time the Research Assessment Exercise had increased pressure to publish as well as to seek funding for research projects. Added to this, the routine requirements of quality assurance included increased demands for documentation and a more crowded schedule of departmental meetings. For those involved in preparing for audit or assessment visits, the pressure became intense, as exemplified by a senior lecturer who reported having worked for 120 hours in the week before a subject review (Morley, 2003: 77).

In a retrospective review of academic workloads published in 2010, Tight used evidence from a series of ten different workload surveys carried out since 1945 to test the validity of

academics' commonly held belief that their workloads had greatly increased. For the purposes of my research, two main messages emerge: firstly, average academic workloads had increased significantly since the 1960s, from 40.5 hours a week in 1961-2 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963:56) to 54.8 hours by 1994 (Court, 1996: 255). Secondly, Tight produced survey evidence that the proportion of academics' time spent on administration had risen inexorably from 11% in universities in 1961-62 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 56) to 33% by 1994 (Court, 1996: 257). Court attributed this latter rise to the demands of the RAE and TQA recently imposed on universities. The realisation that one third of academics' time was by this time spent on administration helps to explain their perception that their workload was increasing. Though their overall total of working hours might not have increased, they inevitably saw the extra hours required for administration as curtailing time for research which was an equally essential but usually much more enjoyable part of their work. The duties associated with quality assurance diverting them from their key functions could thus, paradoxically, undermine 'the quality of the teaching and research it [was] meant to protect' (Tight, 2010: 214).

Analysing the impact of working hours, Kinman *et al.* (2006) reported on two linked studies undertaken in 1998 and 2004 to investigate the incidence and effects of stress in the workplace among UK academics. In the first study, 66% of full-time employees indicated that they worked more than 45 hours in a typical week and 23% reported that they regularly worked more than 55 hours. 72% said that they currently worked longer hours than in recent years and 52% reported that more than 20% of their overall work took place during evenings and weekends (Kinman and Jones, 2003: 25). The second study, undertaken in 2004, showed that 62% of respondents were working beyond the European Union's Working Time Directive weekly maximum of 48 hours per week, while 22% were working more than 55 hours per week (Kinman *et al.*, 2006: 3). Responses from academics interviewed in these studies indicated that the sustained pressure of this demanding workload over a long period had a damaging effect on their job satisfaction and work/life balance.

9.4 'Perform and conform'

Compliance with the government's goals of economy and efficiency meant that academic values and practices had to compete with many other policy objectives in universities – 'economy, efficiency, utility, public accountability, enterprise and various definitions of quality' (Henkel, 2000: 47). At the same time, the traditional model of devolved decision-

making by individual departments was superseded by more authoritarian management with the result that their autonomy became subservient to the goals of the organisation. It was clear to Kogan and Hanney (2000: 188) that 'the quality assessment system changed the balance between managerial accountability and the power of the academic community'. Dearlove (1997: 64) wrote of the requirement for managers to focus on 'productivity and quality' in their management of academics, particularly the greatly increased numbers of contract staff being employed in response to the reduction in the unit of resource for teaching.

The growth of the new managerialism in the universities was described by Ball (2003: 220) as a culture of 'performativity' which exerted a new kind of pressure on staff: 'the teacher, researcher, academic are subject to a myriad of judgements, measures, comparisons and targets'. He associated this with 'a new mode of state regulation' recognisable globally in educational reforms which were requiring 'individual practitioners to organise themselves in response to targets, indicators and evaluations, to set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation' (Ball, 2003: 215). He summed up performativity as a 'technology' for assessing the performance of individuals or organisations and the value and quality of their work through 'the translation of complex social processes and events into simple figures or categories of judgement'. In such a system performance was monitored constantly in the interests of 'accountability', with individuals regularly judged on the achievement of their targets by comparison with others. The expectation of 'continuous improvement' increased the pressure and the translation of comparative statistics of inputs and outputs into scores and league tables often led to a demoralising atmosphere of competition. Loss of academic autonomy through the 'subjugation of universities to the performativity principle' (Harker, 1995: 38) had serious repercussions for many academics. Yet, as Shore and Wright observed (1999: 571), 'non-compliance was not an option' within the prevailing coercive culture so these tensions created 'a basic cultural clash between academics and management' (Morley, 2003: 51).

Research studies at the start of the new century gave a vivid impression of what it felt like for the academics involved in this uncomfortable culture change which for many was epitomised by the demands of quality assurance. The discomfort for employees of this compulsion 'to perform and conform' within such a culture (Morley, 2003: 72) was exacerbated by the constantly changing demands and performance indicators which resulted in a high degree of uncertainty. She further argued (2002: 126) that the 'technologies' devised for quality audit and assessment were having a damaging impact on

‘organizational culture, academic identities and pedagogical relations in higher education’. Many of the interviewees in Henkel’s case study saw public accountability rather than educational improvement as the main purpose of quality assurance and, though it was widely perceived as a ‘legitimate public concern’, the ways in which it was implemented gave rise to ‘widespread feelings of coercion and cynicism’ (Henkel, 2000: 97). In a review of the first decade of quality assurance, Harvey (2005: 271) commented on the ‘overlapping layers of audit, assessment, accreditation, and external examining’ which added up to what was described in parts of Europe as ‘the British quality juggernaut’.

The increasingly centralised university management structures meant greater intervention in the work of both departments and individual academics, with a consequent loss of independence and status (Harker, 1995: 37). Some academics also resented what they saw as lack of support from their institutions. Initially they thought that university leaders had not put up sufficient resistance to the external imposition of quality assurance by the government and there was also some resentment of an ‘autocratic’ management style, reported by Harvey and Knight (1996: 159), a point echoed by Kinman and Jones (2003: 31) who noted lack of consultation and ‘management by edict’.

There were many criticisms of the quality assessment methods in action. The need to define quantifiable performance indicators for measurement was likely to result in ‘defining both teaching and its products in terms of what is readily measurable’ (Harvey and Knight, 1996: 164) which could fail to reveal anything about the quality of teaching or learning in terms of both processes and outcomes. The pressure to comply with pre-defined criteria could then lead academics to view the objectives of their teaching in terms of quantifiable outputs, and would fulfil Trow’s early prophecy that ‘departments and individuals would shape their activities to what “counts” in the assessments’ (Trow 1994: 20). From an individual point of view, within the prevailing performative environment academics were disturbed at the crudity of such methods being used to make judgements about the quality of their teaching on which their promotion prospects and security of employment would depend. It was recognised that quality assessment had led to an increased focus on teaching which was largely welcomed but on the other hand this could become an added source of career stress. In a performative culture, programmes for ‘staff development’ and requirements to undertake teaching qualifications might be used as a ‘management device for re-educating the workforce to achieve targets’ (Harvey and Knight, 1996: 157).

De Groot, an academic working as an elected officer of the AUT (1997: 134) explained academics' resentment at the methods of measurement being used in the TQA: 'material *quantities* – publication output, numbers of students taught, or funds generated – rather than intellectual or educational *qualities* are very much in the foreground of how academics and their work are valued'. The introduction of quantifiable judgements inevitably introduced a competitive element and gave rise to tensions among staff. The processes of quality assurance converted it into a 'technology' which required special expertise to operate the systems and was separated from the key processes of education. Specialist staff were often separated from other departments in 'buffering sub-units' to manage the communication with external assessors (Power, 1999: 96). The externally imposed processes of quality audit and assessment made academics feel they were under constant surveillance. As summed up by Morley (2003: 53) 'professionalism was being replaced by external monitoring systems'.

9.5 Competition and customers

9.5.1 Academic reactions to league tables

The numerical scoring system which remained in use until the reforms of quality assurance systems in 2002 was a continuing source of dissatisfaction among academics, particularly once the 'results' of the quality assessments appeared in the press in the form of league tables. These were compiled in different ways by different newspapers and had done much to foster a culture of competition among universities, with varying effects. As predicted, strong reservations were expressed about their validity and academics were ambivalent about the publication of the scores. They understood that the public, particularly prospective students and their families, would welcome some accessible information about universities and their relative merits. However, most had ongoing concerns about the highly complex process of subject assessment being reduced to at-a-glance numerical tables. There were many doubts about inconsistency in the methodology used to compile the scores and the inclusion of out-of-date information which could undermine their reliability. In a critique of the methodology used to compile the tables, Berry (1999: 10) concluded that they were unreliable as measures of the relative quality of individual institutions and moreover, such 'dubious rankings' could distract attention from more important issues relating to university standards and value for money. Tight (2000) and Bowden (2000) both produced articles comparing university league tables to football and assessing the different ways in which they were scored and ranked by different

publications. They agreed that the tables were of little value in providing guidance to prospective students seeking to choose a university.

Academics recognised that the publication of league tables could give rise to perverse effects. For example, a university's desire to achieve high standards through maintaining academic rigour in marking and degree classifications could actually lead to attaining a lower place in league tables. Conversely, institutional pressure to gain higher scores might result to a 'dumbing down' of course content and adoption of more lenient marking policies with the aim of inflating the student grades. In these circumstances the publication of information supposedly indicating the quality of an institution would fail to give a true picture.

Nevertheless, scores mattered. The results of quality assessments presented in this way quickly became a key element in the national and international competition in higher education, with the universities becoming particularly keen to market themselves to high-paying international students who could make a considerable difference to a university's cash-flow. As Morley (2003: 132) pointed out, 'scores have exchange and cash value in today's education market. They purport to reduce risk and provide information for consumers to make so-called informed choices'. On the other hand, they were also a cause of anxiety to individual academics on the grounds that the 'public labelling' of organizations would foster 'competition, resentments and anxiety' and a low score would inevitably be seen as 'a badge of degradation' (Morley, 2002: 136). Consequently, even the sternest critics of the shortcomings of numerical scoring admitted, somewhat shamefacedly, to being pleased if their university scored well and to using news of the results for advertising purposes to enhance its public image in the competitive market. As foreseen by Fairclough (1993) information acquired for the purposes of quality assurance was thus being subverted into the role of image making and promotion. Looking back, Henkel (2000:79) commented that 'TQA quickly came to be seen as a competitive exercise, with tangible significance for institutional and departmental reputations'.

The importance of league tables was confirmed by interviewees in this study. From his experience as chief executive of the QAA, Williams explained the universities' concern. *'If they didn't get 21, the newspapers with the league tables didn't classify them as excellent and therefore it was bad news for them. So you got vice-chancellors ringing up and saying "Why 20? It should have been 21"'* (I: 9). From a different angle, as a former vice-chancellor pointed out, there could be some advantages to published rankings as an

incentive to improving quality: *'looking at it from the perspective of an academic manager, they are important. You do try to improve your ranking. You do think of things that you could do, some of which involve the quality, that will have an impact. So on the whole I would say they're positive'* (I: 6).

9.5.2 Teachers 'delivering' courses

The view by successive governments of university education as a 'marketable product' whose quality should be subject to the same kind of assessment criteria as 'the production of goods and services in a real market' (Johnson, 1994: 375) had serious implications for teachers. Trow (1994: 13) recalled a comment from a senior official on one of the Funding Councils who saw teaching quality assessment as a means of judging whether the teacher 'delivers the course the customer (i.e. the student) expected to get'. This version of education reduced the role of the teacher to deliverer of 'a product which the customer buys' (Trow, 1994: 13). Teaching had become a 'service industry' and good quality teaching was now regarded 'not as a gift but as a right' (Morley (2002:133). Henkel (2000: 104) reported that few academics in her survey were in favour of 'commodifying' higher education or treating students as customers. Cameron (2003: 134) criticised the 2003 White Paper as a 'triumph of marketisation and consumerism' which reduced the job of the academic to giving 'the customer value for money'. However, Harvey (2010: 101) commented that 'the student as consumer is an uncomfortable metaphor for most academics' and research carried out by Lomas (2007) revealed that this concept was widely rejected: 'academics do not believe that higher education is just another service industry.... Whereas the government and its agencies stress the need to consider students as customers, there is very limited support for this notion amongst academic staff'. The effects of this trend on the relationship between teachers and students are explored in chapter 10.

9.6 Academics undermined

9.6.1 Loss of professional autonomy

Chapter 5 described the gradual deterioration in the position of academics during the latter part of the 20th century and the consequent demoralisation of the profession. This trend had many causes and had been well underway therefore before the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act introduced quality assurance systems into universities. It would therefore

not be reasonable to attribute this loss of status and morale solely to the imposition of the regulatory régime and quality assurance was not universally resisted. However, it is important to recognise that for many staff the psychological consequences of quality assurance were far from positive and many respondents in studies reported in this chapter gave evidence of ‘the disabling effects of the stress induced by quality assessments’ (Morley, 2003: 79).

One of the overall consequences for academics of the implementation of quality assurance was a growing feeling of de-professionalisation and loss of trust. Johnson (1994: 378) commented on the ‘contempt for academic self-government now displayed by the central authorities’. In a culture of centralised management, control over the quality assurance of teaching and research had largely been removed from the professional domain of individual academics to become a collective responsibility of institutions and departments. Henkel (2000: 257) emphasised that ‘academic freedom’ meant, among other things, ‘being trusted and being given the space to manage the pattern of one’s own working life and to determine one’s own priorities’. External audit systems introduced in the name of accountability reduced their professional autonomy and also undermined their self-confidence. As Morley (2003: 56) commented ruefully, ‘we are asked to trust the measures rather than the professionals delivering the service’. Blackmore (2009) explained how quality assurance could limit the horizons of teaching:

‘Academics have to make explicit their aims, practices and achievements, both predicting what is to be taught and how it is to be taught, and then teaching to that prediction without deviation, as laid down in unit guides and handbooks, regardless of their student cohort or the unpredictability of the teaching moment that may lead them elsewhere’ (Blackmore (2009: 863)

9.6.2 Polarisation and hostility

Sharp divisions arose between ‘a new stratum of able individuals’ who were prepared to embrace the new systems and those who resisted (Amann, 1995: 474). He observed how ‘those who [kept] faith with the traditional values [were] often treated with pity and contempt – as relics of the old world who [had] not quite got their act together’. Morley (2002: 131) explained that caution was necessary: however much academics might resent the practices of quality assurance, any challenge to its methodology could be interpreted as resistance to the goals of public accountability and the improvement of teaching quality. Those who opposed its bureaucratic demands were scorned by management as being obstructive and backward-looking: ‘opting out of quality assurance, for example, via

fugitive or oppositional tactics, [was] dismissed as the extinct roar of the dinosaurs' (Morley, 2003: 8). Moreover, however ostensibly laudable and motivational the stated aim of enhancement of teaching quality might be, what this could mean for academics in a performative culture was being shackled to a relentless and unattainable goal of continuous improvement. The management guru, Charles Handy, went as far as to say that for an employee the conflicting pressures of being 'forced to act and speak in ways which do not reflect his real beliefs in order to do his job' could become 'a private crucifixion' (Handy, 1985: 139).

9.6.3 Quality assurance as an instrument of power

Morley (2002: 127) took as her starting point a strong statement that 'quality assurance is a régime of power' and several other academics shared this view. Certain aspects identified in this chapter such as the oppressive schedule of external audit and assessment, constant surveillance of staff, pressure to perform and the turbulence of perpetual change were consistent with that Foucauldian interpretation. Harvey and Knight (1996: 157) suggested that where staff development became 'a management device for re-educating the workforce' it could be seen as 'a university contribution to a Foucaudian (*sic*) panopticon'. By the end of the 1990s other academics went so far as to develop a kind of conspiracy theory which regarded quality assurance as a draconian instrument deliberately planned in advance and being imposed by a malevolent government on universities to curb the autonomy of academics (Shore and Wright, 1999, Strathern, 2000, Ball, 2003).

In some ways the idea of a carefully planned strategy seems persuasive but the assessment of the 'piecemeal and pragmatic' nature of government policy underlying the implementation of quality assurance discussed earlier in this chapter does not support this argument. For example, according to Shattock (2012: 220) the Jarratt Report had 'been a well-intentioned stab at taking a long term view of the organization of universities ... but it was not a Government blueprint for a new approach to university management'. Nevertheless, while most academics could generally accept public accountability and the enhancement of teaching quality as the guiding principles of quality assurance, many were uncomfortable with the dictatorial practices involved in its implementation. Harvey and Knight (1996: 176) commented that in some places 'many governments have found in the assessment of quality a hammer with which to pound higher education'. The remainder of this chapter explores the psychological effects of that 'pounding'.

9.7 *Psychological effects on staff*

9.7.1 Cumulative strains

A survey undertaken by Fulton (1995) reported that the heavy workload, including the demands of quality assurance, and resulting time pressures were contributing to loss of morale. Traditional academic values and methods of teaching were challenged by the measurement of quality in purely quantifiable terms. Higher numbers of students meant reduced opportunities for individual attention. A particular frustration was the limited time now available for research, especially in view of the pressure on academics to produce high quality work for the Research Assessment Exercise. Harvey (1995: 131) commented that for staff, even for those who supported the quality systems, ‘the real obstacle’ was one of time. Academics participating in the survey undertaken by Kinman and Jones in 1998 likened the cumulative effects of these problems during the 1990s to the experience of ‘running up the down escalator’ (Kinman and Jones, 2003). The relentless pressure could lead to feelings of stress and inadequacy while external scrutiny in a competitive environment created insecurity and loss of self-esteem.

These problems had multiple causes. Though all of them could not be attributed to quality assurance, there is no doubt that in the minds of academics quality assurance policies were linked with the onslaught of changes that had engulfed higher education during the 1980s and 1990s which had been experienced by many as a period of ‘loss or crisis’ (Henkel, 2000: 108). Henkel (2000: 184) also commented on the level of frustration caused by reduced opportunities for research because for many ‘the combination of research and teaching was what mattered for their sense of identity’. A crisis of identity could be induced by the different roles that academics were now expected to fulfil in teaching, research and administration, and strains of responding to the varying demands of internal and external stakeholders. One of Morley’s respondents expressed academics’ collective anger at ‘the proliferation of committees and functionaries in the college whose jobs seem to serve no purpose except to waste the time of hard-working academics with inane policy documents, etc.’ (Henkel, 2000: 207) while Morley (2003) claimed that the overwork and tension involved in preparing for Subject Review was actually preventing academics from being good teachers.

Though some academics welcomed the opportunities for involvement in quality assurance processes, there could be tensions for the new group of ‘peer assessors, quality assurance

officers and managers' in auditing the work of their colleagues (Morley, 2003: 6). Biggs (2003: 270) commented that staff in Teaching and Learning centres might be used as 'teaching police' to pass information about individuals to personnel departments. In addition, increased scrutiny of their own 'performance' and competition with other institutions created a new environment which many academics found extremely threatening.

De Groot (1997: 134) regretted the 'decline of collegiality and democratic governance in universities' for individual academics who found themselves increasingly subjected to the decisions of university managers and external regulators such as tight budgets and quality mechanisms. Harvey and Knight (1996: 100) echoed this view of the de-motivating effect of external scrutiny which could induce 'a feeling of being manipulated, of not being trusted or valued, by managers and outside agencies' while Knight and Trowler (2000) demonstrated that these combined stresses inevitably resulted in reduced job-satisfaction for academics and could have long-term negative effects on their wellbeing. For staff directly involved in preparing for and participating in quality audits and assessments these were sometimes especially severe and extended beyond the workplace into their personal lives.

9.7.2 Distorted behaviour and game-playing

Inevitably, the cumulative effect of this kind of pressure was likely to be 'disaffection' with their work. As flagged up in chapter 7, many commentators observed that attempts by academics to deal with these levels of psychological stress were manifesting themselves in various kinds of 'distorted behaviour'. Johnson (1994: 379) asserted that 'what the purveyors of assessment procedures and performance yardsticks also forget is the human capacity for protective counter measures and for taking steps to beat the system' while Amann (1995) drew a parallel between these tactics and the behaviour of officials in the Communist bloc. Henkel (2000: 261) concluded that such measures were adopted, often by those with the least autonomy, as self-protection mechanisms against the pressures they were under – 'more or less conscious strategies to conserve academic identities, collective and individual'. These attempts at subversion took a number of forms, collective and individual, from 'wilful misunderstanding' of the procedures of the TQA to apparent compliance which was not translated into action. In some ways academics could resist the bureaucratisation of quality assurance by dismissing it as 'a diversion from addressing

what they saw as issues of substantive quality... an issue for administrators which could be separated from their educational aims and values' (Henkel, 2000: 109). When talking or writing about their experiences of quality assurance, academics often sought to dissociate themselves from involvement. Harvey (1995) and others had already recognised a desire to maintain a separation between the essential processes of teaching and learning and the mechanistic aspects of quality assurance.

Hence the tendency to regard participation in quality assurance as a kind of game. Morley (2003: 74) commented on the high incidence of 'ludic imagery' used by her respondents to describe the processes of quality assurance. For example, one senior lecturer described the QAA's processes as 'being a matter of playing the game ... and if you don't quite know the rules of the game you then make mistakes ... and sometimes you're lucky with the game so you get a weak referee, sometimes you get a nasty referee and you get sent off' (Morley, 2003: 74-75). Henkel (2000: 109) agreed that 'the task of academics and the institutions was to learn the rules and play to win'. This might involve subjugating their personal resistance to the prevailing interests of the university: 'quality evaluations involved game playing to cast the evaluated programme or institution in the best possible light' (Harvey, 2005: 272). This kind of perverse reaction to quality assurance occurred when academics, by their own admission, found themselves being lured into competing for high scores in the TQA although this was a process they despised. A related point was made by Cameron (2003) who sarcastically drew attention to the benefit for the government when academics were themselves persuaded to create propaganda, advertising the excellence of the education they were providing despite the strains of chronic underfunding.

From his experience on the other side of the fence, Williams reported that this situation was well understood by the regulatory bodies: *'of course academics are very clever so they learn how to play the game. The stakes are very high in this case, so they win'*, as demonstrated by the Warwick economists in 2001. This expertise in achieving high scores in assessments could result in grade inflation. Williams also recalled a perverse effect of this competitive culture: *'when the HEQC or the QAA came in and gave them excellent or 24 ... then those departments were unmanageable. "We're perfect, we've been told, get off our backs"'* (I: 9). Success in this context could thus undermine any possible motivational effect of the exercise.

9.7.3 Emotions expressed through metaphor

Under the heading ‘the scholarship of resistance’, chapter 7 noted how academics summoned the power of their rhetoric and introduction of literary allusions to express the strength of their resistance to quality assurance. But there was another way in which their ‘angry letters and articles in the public press and memoranda to the QAA’ used metaphorical language and allusion to describe the affective impacts of quality assurance (Morley (2003: 71). This could be ‘a display of cultural capital, or a sense that quality processes are fictive’ intentionally using ‘culture’ to resist ‘the discourse of utilitarianism’ (Morley, 2003: 75). The use of industrial metaphors described in chapter 6 came into this category and had continued throughout the next decade: quality assurance was widely referred to as a powerful ‘technology’ (Ball (2003) through which higher universities had been ‘re-engineered’ (Morley, 2003: viii) or ‘re-moulded’ (Alderman, 1996: 187). Higher education had become ‘a production line’ where the workers must achieve a ‘near-zero defect’ performance (Morley, 2003: 84).

References to totalitarian régimes by Amman (1995) and others conveyed academics’ reactions to ‘menace, authoritarianism and the imperative to follow rules that are constantly in flux’ (Morley, 2003: 75). For example Johnson (1994: 379) drew attention to ‘the Potemkin villages’ of evidence constructed by academics in order to prove their ‘excellence’ and deplored the ‘paraphernalia of futile bureaucratization required for assessors who come from on high like emissaries from Kafka’s castle’. The hegemony acquired by quality assurance was also expressed in striking religious metaphors for example McNay’s comment (1992: 10) that ‘the temples of learning and their priests were derided and their control passed to the laity’. Power (1999: 98) wrote that since the mid-1980s a new ‘theology of quality, efficiency and enterprise [had] emerged in higher education’. Hart (1997: 295-6) represented its powerful influence as a movement promoted by ‘qualitymongers’ who ‘spread the gospel’ and a vice-chancellor committed to quality was described as ‘a kind of quality muezzin’ who would summon the faithful throughout the university to pay homage to ‘a golden, or rather leaden, calf before which would all be expected to bow down and adore’. Other metaphors were used to convey the feeling of being overwhelmed. Holmes (1993: 5) adopted a nautical turn of phrase writing that ‘those drowning in the sea of new-found managerialism have sought refuge on the lifeboat of techniques ... drawn from the commercial world’. Strathern (1997: 305) compared the function of audit with ‘Frankenstein’s monster’, while respondents to Newton (2000: 155)

likened the apparently insatiable demands for information to a ritual of ‘feeding the beast’. Whatever the reasons for resorting to metaphor, it seems valid to assert that, consciously or unconsciously, academics were using this device to express their powerful feelings of being confronted by overwhelming forces or to try to distance themselves from this oppressive environment.

9.7.4 Quality assurance as theatre

An extended metaphor which occurs frequently in the literature was the concept of quality assurance as a drama with a turbulent plot being played out by a cast of thousands. This interpretation gains force from the frequency with which many people involved in quality assurance resorted to theatrical metaphors to describe its processes, another strategy for dissociation. In their descriptions, quality audits and assessments often became ‘performances’ in which staff were compelled to take set roles. As early as 1989, Becher (1989: 48) had commented that preparations for an AAU audit visit were like a performance organised by managers and a decade later Shore and Wright (2000: 567) reported that one university had even put on a two-day dress rehearsal in preparation for an assessment visit. Harvey (2005: 272) commented that visits by TQA assessors had been criticised for their ‘theatricality’: ‘the peers and the review subjects perform as required ... and the whole is a stage-managed set piece’. While academics played the principal roles, Salter and Tapper (2000: 68) described students as ‘the privileged members of the university audience’ while administrators, politicians and bureaucrats were ‘a supporting cast to the central academic performance’. Kogan and Hanney (2000) identified the importance of the actions and interactions of individual actors which, according to Henkel (2000: 110) meant that participation in quality audits and assessments could become ‘matters of image management, performance and self-presentation’. The role-playing metaphor was most strikingly developed in Morley’s chapter entitled ‘A Comedy of Manners’ (2002). She described quality procedures as a ‘régime of power’ within which ‘all actors, like characters in a Jane Austen novel, play carefully choreographed roles’. This perception also involved serious criticisms of the methodology of quality assurance. In an article *What Price Teaching Quality?* (2001: 1) Harrison and Lockwood used theatrical terms to describe what they had learnt from their participation in Warwick Department of Economics Subject Review. ‘QAA’s methodology is not scientific. It is based on courtroom drama, not science. Of course in a courtroom it helps if your case is solid. And the exhibits on your side dominate in quantity and quality. But that is only half the story. The other half is theatre: stage management and rhetoric’. The process of subject

review could be choreographed accordingly and the realisation of this might help to achieve high scores but it also led to cynicism among academics.

Ball linked the ideas of ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’ in which an organisation created ‘an enacted fantasy’ to present a picture which complied with the prescribed targets or policies. He used the word ‘fabrications’ to describe these ‘versions of an organization ... which does not exist... they are produced purposefully in order to be accountable’ (Ball, 2003: 224). Staff compelled to take part in such ‘performances’ resorted to ‘inauthentic practice and relationships’ (Ball, 2003: 222) and according to Harvey (2005: 273) the compromises involved, gave rise to a kind of ‘moral corruption’. Apart from the compromising effects on staff, it is reasonable to surmise that the falseness of such charades in which the main aim was ‘impression management’ (Newton, 2000: 156) must inevitably have undermined the validity of any judgements based on them. Blackmore (2009: 862) agreed that institutional audits had become ‘staged performances, often with little relevance to real practice other than as worrisome data-gathering exercises’.

9.8 *Employment issues*

The strains of participating in this drama took its toll on the major players. By the late 1990s many front-line academics were feeling the effects of a decade of constant change, increasing workload and the creation of an oppressive culture of performativity which was threatening their psychological wellbeing. Newton (2000) had found that discontent was leading staff to turn against management and concluded that staff conditions and rewards should themselves be considered and addressed as an aspect of quality. Respondents to a Kinman and Jones survey of 2003 clearly identified impersonal management as a contributory factor: ‘They demand that we take on more admin, more teaching, more research, but they are less interested about our quality of life at work. We feel we have been treated as numbers, we have to produce what they want in order to achieve targets, meet deadlines, reach the highest ratings’ (Kinman and Jones, 2003: 31). In this and their later survey, there was also evidence that quality assurance was partly to blame for this state of affairs: 74% of respondents to the same survey believed that there was ‘too much emphasis on quality assurance in the sector’ (Kinman and Jones 2003: 30). Quality assurance appeared in the list of 12 major ‘self-reported job stressors’ reported by respondents to two surveys about the well-being of UK academics (Kinman *et al.*, 2006:

17) while ‘increased bureaucracy’ and ‘quality demands’ were among the reasons given for academics considering leaving the university sector (Kinman *et al.*, 2006: 20).

Some of the pictures painted by commentators of the psychological effects experienced by academics went beyond a depiction of pressures in the workplace to include more serious concerns. In 1994, Fisher produced a book entitled *Stress in Academic Life: the Mental Assembly Line*, while the surveys by Kinman and Jones reported levels of ‘burnout’ and concerns about the psychological well-being of staff. Some of the symptoms were expressed in pathological terms. For example, Morley (2003: 84) described the effect of quality audits on institutions as ‘a type of organizational trauma’ and reported that the stress on individuals was causing disabling symptoms of ‘panic and sleeplessness’. She claimed that the double burden of the RAE and Subject Review by the QAA were creating ‘a pincer movement of fear and alienation’ which carried long-term risks for academics (Morley, 2002: 128). Feeling coerced into complying efficiently with the demands of quality assurance, whose principles and practices they fundamentally rejected, in order to achieve as high a score as possible for their own universities could produce what Morley (2002:129) defined as ‘cognitive dissonance’ in individuals and what Blackmore and Sachs (cited by Ball, 1997: 221) called ‘institutional schizophrenia’. De Groot (1997: 134) reported that many academics (particularly women) were experiencing ‘alienation’ – ‘a growing sense of separation between work and personal identity’ – and ‘anxiety’, arising from job insecurity caused by growing competition and scarce resources. Identifying the conflict between academics’ own views of what constituted good practice and the behaviour demanded by ‘performance’, Ball (2003: 215) went so far as to describe the tensions between traditional academic values and the new culture of performativity as a struggle for ‘the teacher’s soul’. In his opinion, reforms of this magnitude did not ‘simply change what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are,’

From an employment point of view, Kinman and Jones (2003: 37) reported that ‘stress is now seen by many British employers as one of the most important health and safety issues in the workplace’ and, three years later, identified that UK academics were prone to higher levels of psychological distress than those in other countries and those in other UK professional groups (2006: 232). Academics such as Shore and Wright (1999) who had researched the views of their colleagues strongly endorsed these findings. Morley (2003: 79) drew attention to the fact that every one of her informants had expressed concerns about staff working conditions and asserted that ‘quality assessment should become a

health and safety issue in the workplace. Basic human resource management approaches do not seem to have been applied to quality assurance’.

9.9 Summary : the human costs of quality assurance

As early as 1994 Johnson (1994: 375) had pointed out that ‘the manner in which the adaptation to mass higher education is being carried out is also crucial to the standards of universities in the future and to the quality and effectiveness of their staffs’. He also criticised those, such as politicians ‘who fail to take seriously the evidence of widespread demoralization within the academic profession’ (Johnson, 1994: 377). Harvey and Knight (1966) and Newton (2000) continued to argue that the quality of teaching was dependent on individual frontline staff and their personal interactions with students. Appealing for this problem to be taken seriously, Kinman *et al.* (2006: 20) pointed out that UK higher education had ‘long enjoyed a reputation for the high quality of its provision. Higher education is a labour-intensive industry that relies heavily upon the capabilities and goodwill of its employees to provide such quality’. The belief that ‘the mind, body and emotions [were being] punished by the regulatory processes’ led Morley (2003: 65) to conclude that in addition to the considerable financial costs of quality assurance, there were human costs too and the current level of ‘self-sacrifice’ was too high.

CHAPTER 10: STUDENTS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION ‘MARKET’

‘We should retain always the sense that at the heart of higher education is the student’ (Barnett, 1992: 11).

10.1 Introduction: ‘consumers’ of higher education

‘The growing influence of market ideologies’ (Henkel, 2000: 102) meant that by the advent of the Labour Government and the establishment of the QAA in 1997, concepts such as consumer rights and customer choice had taken root in higher education. Jackson (1997: 167-8) judged that ‘the shift to more customer-focused market-oriented regulatory régimes in UK HE [had] been promoted through a political aspiration to invest students with the rights of consumers’. Within this market paradigm, universities were seen as competitive ‘service providers’ with ‘market forces as the best form of accountability’ (Shore and Wright, 1999: 571).

The idea of students as customers gained impetus when debates about student fees became a key element of the Dearing Committee’s remit. Interviewee 6 commented that *‘the politicians didn’t think ... much about the choice for the individual and value for money for the individual student until fees came along’* (I: 6) but, as Kelly foresaw, *‘if you’re going to move towards a fee-based system ... you’ve got to move towards evidence of accountability to students’* (I: 3). The Dearing Report acknowledged the growing recognition of the student as customer or consumer being encouraged to adopt the standpoint ‘of an investor in receipt of a service, and to seek, as an investor, value for money and a good return from the investment’ (NICHE, 1997, 22: para 19).

The introduction in the 1998 Teaching and Higher Education Act of an ‘up-front’ tuition fee of £1,000 to be directly paid by students was identified as ‘the most obvious symbol of the marketisation of HE’ (Williams, 2013: 48-49). Cameron (2003: 134) saw it as logical that with the increasing burden of tuition fees, students would become more aware of the value for money issue, demanding more or putting up with less ‘now they have to pay for it’. Furedi (2009) agreed that ‘encouraging students to think of themselves as customers has fostered a mood in which education is regarded as a commodity that must represent value for money’.

Within the market paradigm, the contractual relationship between student and the university was assumed to lead to the successful acquisition of a degree in return for the

fees paid and the perception of 'educational success as a right'. In considering the context where students were adopting this mindset, Molesworth *et al.* (2009: 278) drew on the philosophy of Fromm (1993) to describe a situation where students' aim was to '*have*' a degree rather than to '*be*' learners. Those who were strongly career-motivated would be likely to choose vocational courses in 'market-led' universities that would lead to well-paid jobs. Selecting from an increasing number of modules might come to resemble choosing products in a supermarket. They would judge the quality of their education against the utilitarian criterion of how far it supplied them with what they needed to get a degree in return for their tuition fees. Indeed, according to Molesworth *et al.* (2009: 283) payment of tuition fees might lead to a view that staff had 'no right *not* to award the consumer their purchase.'

Many academics reacted strongly against this model which was at odds with an opposing view of the student as 'a co-producer of education', a participant with the teacher in a process of learning leading to intellectual and personal development (Redding, 2005: 412). Entwistle (1997: 4) observed that a clear gap was emerging between the kind of pedagogy which encouraged 'deep learning' and the consumer market approach: 'much of our teaching seems to induce a passive, reproductive form of learning which is contrary to the aims of the teachers themselves' (Entwistle, 1997: 4, cited by Molesworth *et al.* 2009: 282). Gibbs (2001: 87) also recognised that when 'employability skills' became 'the drivers of choice', the traditional educational goals of deep learning and personal development would be compressed into 'extrinsic market performance indicators'. They feared that faced with the irreconcilable challenge of maintaining quality and standards at the same time as pleasing the 'customers', teachers might be compelled to assume the role of mere 'suppliers' expected to provide students with what they needed to pass the course, rather than guiding their intellectual development through a process of critical reflection. Harvey and Knight (1996: 58) summarised the universities' opposition to the invasion of higher education by the market: 'for most academics, this consumerist rhetoric is the language of people who do not teach. Education is not a service being sold to customers or supplied to clients, it is a process in which students are participants!'. Gibbs (2001: 86) pointed out the risk for universities 'if to satisfy the economic model of education, they treat learners as objects of educational achievement to be counted, accredited and initiated into the performativity of a credentialised society'.

Interestingly, not all students were keen to assume the identity that was being constructed for them. A decade later, Williams (2013) reported from conversations with students that

though they were inevitably influenced by costs and the pursuit of a degree to lead to employment, an interest in their subject continued to be the main motivation for some. From a different perspective, recent contact with students had convinced Kelly that though they were having to do business with a university as a *'retailer of degrees'* (I: 3) many had no desire to get involved as demanding customers and were reluctant to complain. As one student responded in an interview: 'students are not buying a product or a service: they are investing time in a joint venture' (Lomas, 2007: 40).

Nevertheless, in the prevailing commercial climate, students were identified as the customers in the higher education market and promoting their rights became increasingly important through such measures as increasing information to guide choice, seeking student views about the service they were receiving and introducing complaints mechanisms through which dissatisfied customers could seek redress. One result of this was that quality assurance became increasingly regarded 'as a form of student empowerment as the QAA "champions" the voice of students through regulating institutions' teaching and assessment practices' (Williams, 2013: 48-49).

10.2 Information to guide student choice

The requirement to publish increasing amounts of information about the quality of provision was seen as part of 'the operation of market principles in UK HE', intended 'to inform choice and facilitate comparison' (Jackson 1997: 173). Linked with the consumerist view of students as 'customers' was the frequently expressed political theory that 'choice would drive up quality' and in the 2004 Education Act the provision of information was defined as one of the major responsibilities of the QAA. The idea was that universities would be motivated to improve the quality of their courses as students and parents became increasingly discerning in their use of such sources of information, including QAA reports, to guide their choices. There were strong challenges from Dill (1998), Brown (2004) and others to the assumption that student choices based on this kind of information would lead directly to the improvement of courses by the universities. While such a claim might be valid in the consumer market where advertising and customer responses can directly influence suppliers to improve their products in an effort to increase sales, a similar effect in higher education could not be identified with any certainty.

Some academics were particularly sceptical about the ability of QAA reports to guide choice. There was a concern that their content would be out-of-date because of the length of the assessment cycles and in the early days there was little uptake. Dill (1998) reported little evidence of public demand for the QAA reports or of increased applications to departments which had received the highest ratings. Underwood (2000) questioned the validity and age of the data which undermined comparability, the reports' inaccessible style and the possibility of selective or over-simplistic interpretation by the press (in the form of league tables) or by the universities themselves for marketing purposes. He cited a survey by consultants Segal Quince Wicksteed (1999) which found that QAA reports were considered a less useful source of information about quality and standards than the universities themselves, league tables or school careers advisers.

Interviewees for this study expressed similar reservations about the suitability of quality assessment reports to guide valid judgements. It became apparent early on that parents seeking information about universities were unlikely to scrutinise the TQA reports in depth. In fact Interviewee 1 believed that *'they really flipped to the back page to see what sort of things were said... and because of the grading the ones who got 'highly satisfactory' would seem to be the good guys. So you did what you could to get your kids in there'* (I: 1). Kelly also observed that 21st century students would be much more likely to consult the wealth of *'informal guides'* to universities on the internet: *'now a bright student doesn't go to try to find a quality assessment report, if such exists. They go on-line and they try to get the patter from the students themselves'* (I: 3). Blackstone expressed a view that in recent years, though they might look for details of a specific course in which they were interested, *'you wouldn't find a single student applying to university who would go and read the 80 pages of QAA rather heavily jargonised reporting on their audit'* (I: 7).

Williams had concerns about the preparedness of students to make such important choices about their futures: *'it's all about the student, which is up to a point understandable but also I think very dangerous, because, in my reactionary view of these things, the under-21s are not sufficiently mature, and don't have sufficient experience to know enough to make an informed choice'* (I: 9). Cameron (2003: 141) doubted the ability of students to make decisions based on *'the careful comparison shopping that [benefited] their status as paying customers'* and indeed Yorke (2000: 67) quoted students who had been misled by institutions issuing *'misleading promotional material or oral comments that misrepresented what was actually on offer'* through a desire to attract students. For Interviewee 10 this imposition of choice on students was *'immoral nonsense because it actually puts the onus*

on students which we shouldn't be asking them to bear. Because they will bear the onus not only of making a successful choice but of making a bad choice and it's our job as the people who are guardians of quality as far as we can to protect them from making the wrong choice' (I: 10).

Interviewee 10 was also strongly critical of the increasing emphasis on information as an element of quality assurance: *'The big trend I think since the start of this century, beginning with the Cooke Report on information,... has been that increasingly institutions see quality assurance as being about reputation management and not about improvement of quality' (I: 10).* It seemed to many academics that 'the quality of education was increasingly felt to be dependent upon the quality of information provided for students about their programmes' (Henkel: 2000: 100) rather than the quality of teaching. While some believed this approach could promote independent learning, others took a contrary view, believing it constituted spoon-feeding likely to undermine students' potential for independence. Williams (2013: 76) provided a forceful critique of the government's assumption that 'HE institutions [could] be compared in the same way as car insurance or personal computer'. She argued that the kind of quantitative information provided, in combination with marketing material, was likely to encourage a purely consumerist attitude in students and could offer no guidance on identifying the quality of the potentially 'transformative nature of the learning experience' they might be seeking.

10.3 Students as evaluators of quality

10.3.1 Student feedback

From the earliest attempts to establish quality assurance in UK higher education, it was taken as a given that any system of assessment must include an opportunity for students to express their views. According to Barnett (1992: 109) consideration of the extent to which students' views were 'sought and acted on' must form part of the 'irreducible core of any appraisal of institutional quality' and universities had no difficulty in accepting this as a fundamental element in the educational process. For example, section 2 of the *Glasgow University Guide to Good Practice* for quality assurance (1992) issued to all staff stated that 'every department should have effective processes for obtaining student feedback on courses and on teaching'. This practice was based on the principle that 'students have both a right and a responsibility to comment on a course and to suggest improvements' which

usually encouraged ‘the positive interest and response of students’ (University of Glasgow, 1992: 2.1.2). Interviewee 2 commented that the quality assurance processes had become much more ‘*student-centred*’ with a great deal more emphasis on ‘*the stated views of students, and ... keeping them informed*’ (I: 2). The growing perception of students as the ‘customers’ led to the introduction of ‘a panoply of student feedback mechanisms’ intended to seek their views (Jackson, 1997: 168). Students were expected to complete evaluation forms at the end of every course while quality audit and assessment visits routinely included discussion with students.

An early survey undertaken as part of a *Quality in Higher Education* Project undertaken at the University of Central England (Harvey *et al.*, 1992) revealed that both students and staff across all disciplines regarded factors that contributed to the student learning experience rather than input/output statistics as the most important criteria for assessing quality. Questionnaires covered aspects of the learning process such as course aims and objectives, programme content, assessment methods, library provision and availability of information-technology facilities.

The principle of student involvement later became an essential element in ‘the orthodoxy of quality assurance’ (Henkel, 2000: 102). The 2003 White Paper (DfES, 2003: 11) made clear that involving students in mechanisms to judge teaching and learning was intended to place students in the role of evaluators of quality. Barnett saw the position of students gradually changing as a greater onus was put on them to become ‘*participants in the quality process in all sorts of ways*’ (I: 8).

However, though seeking student views in this way continued as an essential element of universities’ quality assurance procedures, it was not wholly without problems. Under a headline ‘The sense in satisfaction’ Harvey (*THES*, 18 January, 1999) welcomed the fact that student feedback on teaching was now viewed as important but identified some of the pitfalls. The questionnaires were often in a standardised format which meant that the same questions were not applicable to all types of course and the questions might focus on the interests of teachers rather than students. The routine nature of the process and constant demands for evaluation could make students reluctant to provide returns. Barnett observed that in universities it was ‘*very hard sometimes to elicit the voice of the students, both informally and formally, and so one hears complaints about questionnaire-fatigue and students’ reluctance to sit on committees and so forth*’ (I: 8). Analysis of the information in the evaluation forms generated further time-consuming bureaucracy for staff which meant

that the forms might be collected but not analysed. The need to take action in response to student criticisms could place extra strain on already stretched resources and hard-pressed administrators. On the other hand, failure to respond to their suggestions inevitably led to cynicism about the potential for improvement and loss of credibility in the system. Harvey stressed that the process needed to be taken seriously: 'feedback will only play a significant role in empowering students if it leads to action' (Harvey, *THES*, 18 January, 1999).

Externally, the introduction of the NSS in 2005 gave student feedback an official place within the national Quality Assurance Framework and rapidly became very important to universities as a public indicator of the level of satisfaction experienced by their students. Looking back on the first four years of the NSS, Furedi (2009) commented that its effect had been to transform 'student sentiment into an indicator of quality ... explicitly used to hold universities accountable for the "experience" they provide to their students'. The NUS welcomed the fact that universities were now giving more weight to student views but the survey also gave rise to controversy. Williams saw real difficulties in over-reliance on the NSS: '*the National Student Survey's a bit problematic because it encourages popularity... The danger now is that this has become the key factor in league tables so far as teaching quality is concerned. And it is just not fit for that purpose*' (I: 9). Some academic critics felt that the internal student feedback questionnaires with their focus on individual courses were more reliable as tools to promote improvement than the inevitably 'broader, blunter national surveys' (Harvey, 2010: 99). The Vice-Chancellor of the Open University which topped the NSS table in the first survey accepted the importance of listening to student views but identified risks in the new approach: 'you have got to be very careful not to find yourself trapped in some kind of crass consumerism culture' (*The Guardian Education*, 22 September, 2005). However, Gibbs (2010: 27) also defended the value of student feedback in assessing quality: 'students can readily tell the difference between teachers they like and teachers who they think are good teachers, and the common criticism that student feedback is simply a popularity parade is largely unfounded'. On the other hand, he stressed that its value will depend on how far student ratings are based on assessment of activities known to improve learning or global judgements of what is 'good'.

10.3.2 'The satisfaction paradox'

Identifying what she called 'the satisfaction paradox', Williams (2013: 99) argued that it could be a mistake to accept the measurement of student satisfaction in both internal and external surveys as 'a proxy for monitoring and regulating the student experience'. For one thing, it would often be difficult for students to give a fair assessment of their 'learning outcomes' immediately after the end of the course. There were also doubts about whether students had sufficient maturity to judge. Because they varied widely in their motivation for attending lectures (Dolnicar, 2005) 'student satisfaction' could be no more than a snapshot of an individual student's feelings at a particular moment and should certainly not be taken as 'an objective measure of the quality of academic life' (Williams, 2013: 99). There were also fears that students might use a request for views as an opportunity for complaint or personal criticism, particularly once they were in the position of fee-paying customers.

Masters commented that students' assessment of teachers was '*much more driven by their ability to communicate or transfer knowledge ..., rather than the number of publications they happened to have*' (I: 5). As Biggs (2003: 277) pithily stated, student evaluations tend to 'focus on the actor, not on the script. They tend to measure charisma ... not teaching effectiveness'. There were further concerns that the pursuit of high satisfaction ratings for their courses might encourage academics to abandon challenging intellectual content in favour of more accessible material or adopt less rigorous marking standards, leading to the lowering of academic standards. For an individual academic feeling vulnerable there was a risk that student evaluation would be about 'gaining approval', while for the university as a whole, it could resemble 'a perpetual referendum, with the institution constantly on trial' (Morley, 2002: 135). The importance of achieving high rankings in the NSS could cause divisions among university staff, with senior managers more likely than lecturers to prioritise satisfaction ratings in their efforts to market the institution (Lomas, 2007). Universities had been known to make changes in response to student feedback in order to enhance their approval rating, or even to solicit demands from students in order to demonstrate that they had listened to the 'student voice' (Williams, 2013). Furedi (2009) commented on the difference between the consumer mantra 'the customer is always right' and the intrinsic duty of teachers in higher education to develop critical thinking among students: 'one of the most distinct and significant dimensions of academic and intellectual activity is that it does not often give customers what they want'.

Despite long involvement in the operation of quality assurance, Interviewee 2 was uncertain about the overall value of seeking students' views: *'There's a lot more emphasis on the stated views of students, and attention paid to keeping them informed, but whether that actually does any good is open to question because the proportion of students who are really interested in this is really quite small... I don't really know whether the students' views are more taken into account and there's a real tricky issue about to what extent they ought to be'* (I: 2).

10.3.3 Student involvement in quality assurance processes

For some students individually, participation in quality assurance processes went beyond the completion of feedback forms or responding to the NSS in their final year. For many years class representatives had participated in staff-student committees that contributed to course evaluation (University of Glasgow, 1992). Brown (2004) noted that the QAA's expanded audit method gave a more prominent position to student representatives, with a chance to contribute their views during the review visits, and the JM Consulting report (2005: 27) recognised student involvement as 'one of the successes of Institutional Audit'. Student representation on the main quality assurance committees was by this time the norm in most universities. Students (with training and support from the NUS and the QAA) were involved in providing submissions for audits and in meetings with the auditors themselves and both students and universities regarded their participation as beneficial. Not surprisingly, the NUS was strongly supportive of this participation in quality assessment which gave increasing opportunities for expression of the 'student voice'.

10.4 Dissatisfied customers: student complaints and litigation

10.4.1 Student complaints

A key element of the consumer philosophy in public services was to provide complaints procedures which encouraged the public to complain 'more vociferously,' (Amann (1995: 473). The introduction of a 'contractual' relationship between universities and students, particularly when it entailed the concept of a guarantee of 'good quality teaching for everyone' (DfES, 2003: 4.13), was particularly problematic for higher education where success or failure crucially depends on participation and effort by the student as well as the contribution of the teacher.

One visible acknowledgement of the status of students as ‘customers’ was the introduction of more formalised procedures through which students could raise complaints and seek compensation. The government set up the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) under the legislation of 2004 to consider complaints in England and Wales. While numbers referred to the OIA were very small, they rose steadily from 542 in the first year to reach 900 in 2008 (OIA Annual Report, 2012) and there was a common impression, reinforced by press comment, that student complaints were rising (Shepherd and Williams, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2010). On the other hand, viewed in the context of approximately 2 million students in higher education and bearing in mind that only 7% of complaints were upheld by the OIA in 2008 (*The Independent*, 20 May 2009), these figures in no way represented a crisis of quality in higher education.

10.4.2 Litigation

It was inevitable that some students’ complaints were incapable of resolution at local level and would go as far as the courts. In the *Independent* of 20 March 1997, Hodges reported that students were already suing their universities over a wide range of issues from complaints about the cleanliness of their rooms to failure to provide adequate teaching. One effect of this was the growth of a profitable income stream for lawyers specialising in higher education issues, from City solicitors acting for the Funding Councils or the universities to campaigning lawyers supporting individual students in their complaints. In 2002, a barrister, Charles Bear, argued that a principle of ‘judicial deference’ which had protected universities from scrutiny of their academic judgements was increasingly subject to challenge and predicted that the pressure would increase as students had to pay higher fees (*THES*, 13 December, 2002). A court case reported in *The Daily Telegraph* of 4 March 2003 confirmed ‘the right of students to be treated like consumers and financially compensated if their expectations as to the level of service received were not met’ (Williams, 2013: 7). As a long-term specialist in higher education law, Palfreyman commented that UK universities were understandably starting to share the nervousness of American universities about the possibility of having to make large compensation payments in response to being sued by students (*THES*, 31 March, 2006).

A number of interviewees in this study mentioned the sensitivity felt by universities about possible failure to live up to the claims that they made about the quality of their courses and the consequent vulnerability to legal challenge from students. Barnett identified this as a long-term trend, particularly after the introduction of student fees: ‘we have more

discriminating students coming to universities and making more careful judgements about what they're getting into, and we've had more litigiousness. Universities have been more and more subject to legal challenge by students' (I: 8). Furthermore, Interviewee 1 identified potential anxieties for the quality assurance agencies themselves who were concerned that *'if they made evaluative judgements then they would be opening the door to litigation'* (I: 1). As previously mentioned, Sharp understood that Randall's emphasis in 1997 on the importance of objective and watertight methods of measuring quality stemmed from a need to collect evidence that would be robust enough *'to make it stick in the courts'* (I: 4).

The Independent Adjudicator, Ruth Deech, regretted the speed of students' recourse to litigation which undermined the OIA's intended purpose of pre-empting the involvement of the courts in the handling of most complaints. She attributed this trend partly to the eagerness of 'ambulance-chasing lawyers' to make money out of the higher education sector (*THES*, 31 March, 2006) with the result that university managers became 'very anxious about avoiding student complaints and litigation' (Furedi, 2009). In the same article, Furedi emphasised the importance of acknowledging that this 'culture of complaint on campuses' did not originate from internal issues about quality in the universities but was a product of the political emphasis on consumer rights. Despite the rise in complaints and litigation, Williams (2013: 101) agreed that there was 'little evidence to suggest that the rise in student complaints [was] indicative of students having a poorer quality educational experience than those of previous generations'. Instead she too attributed it largely to 'consumer activism': students becoming used to having their voices heard were more likely to complain if dissatisfied and were then praised as 'virtuous consumers' for complaining.

10.5 'Empowerment' of students

10.5.1 The student voice

One result of encouraging students to assume the role of 'consumers' of higher education and evaluators of quality was that they gained power in various ways. There was increasing pressure on universities to take account of their views and Hart (1997: 301) observed the importation into some universities of the idea that 'the consumer [was] the ultimate authority' while Naidoo and Jamieson (2005: 270) identified 'the student consumer' as a focus of competition and a driver of quality in higher education.

In principle the increased power of the ‘student voice’ was supported by academics and others. For example, Harvey welcomed the fact that ‘student satisfaction feedback [had], at long last, become a serious element of the quality process in higher education’ (*The Guardian*, 17 November, 2001). JM Consulting (2005: 26) believed that participation in institutional audit ‘enhanced student involvement and the student experience’. As director of QAA Scotland, Sharp regarded student involvement in quality assurance procedures as ‘one of the best guarantees against just window-dressing’ (I: 4) and Masters, when chair of the SHEFC Quality Assessment Committee, also considered a meeting with students as an indispensable part of their visit (I: 5).

10.5.2 Impacts on relationships

One of the most important consequences of this empowerment of students was its potential impact on their relationships with the universities and their teachers. As early as 1993, Holmes (1993: 4) had asserted that the consumerist approach to the quality of further or higher education was damaging a crucial relationship: ‘it eats away at central and driving force behind ensuring, maintaining and enhancing quality which is the individual participant/tutor interaction’. Jackson (1997) recognised that while students had welcomed the importance being accorded to their views, academics were not always so happy about its effects. Henkel (2000: 104) commented that ‘overall, while many academics felt it was right that students had more power than had been the case in the past, few were in favour of consumerism, treating students as customers or commodifying higher education’. Many academics felt that there were risks in letting the balance between the power of students and the authority of teachers swing too far: ‘we should not let students drive the higher education process because, after all, they are not buying a degree!’ (Lomas (2007: 39). Furedi (2009) identified a ‘role reversal’ between the teacher and the student and warned that the ‘idealisation of assertive students’ was making a virtue out of complaining. It could be a short step from adverse press publicity about individual complaints to broader criticism of universities in general. Being cast in the potentially conflicting roles of customer and service provider could undermine the essential relationship of trust between student and teacher. In this situation, academics might resort to ‘safe teaching’ and limited stereotyped feedback to students to protect themselves against student complaints’ (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005: 274).

The interviewees for this study offered some interesting views on these changes of role. Kelly warned against ‘tokenism’, in some kinds of student involvement, believing that there were ‘*relatively few students who would understand what [was] going on around them*’ and would be unlikely to ‘*have a grasp of the bigger picture*’ (I: 3). A former vice-chancellor had more serious concerns: ‘*It’s a very personal experience, the relationship between the teacher and the taught and I’m slightly uneasy even now about the extent to which so many of the promotion processes are based upon student evaluations and student surveys... Some of the best teachers you see are very rigorous and often quite tough and many students can’t handle that and so they say they’re bad teachers*’ (I: 1). Barnett (I: 8) considered that the rise in student power was being accompanied by ‘*the gradual disempowerment of the academic profession... Having a sensitivity towards students is crucial if one is a good educator, but that is different from acceding blindly to the will of the student*’. Clearly universities faced a serious challenge in maintaining both academic standards and customer satisfaction.

10.6 Summary

This chapter has traced the emergence of the concept of students as consumers and paying customers in the higher education market which was widely adopted by government, the press and public opinion during the 1990s. It has shown how established aspects of quality assurance such as the requirement for information and the importance of students’ views gained greater prominence as part of the consumer rights agenda, as did the establishment of systems to express dissatisfaction and seek redress. Though these were undoubted benefits, there were also questions about the wisdom of investing the NSS with the authority of a kind of higher education TripAdvisor. Pressure on academics to produce ‘satisfied customers’ might lead to changes which, paradoxically, reduced educational quality or standards. Similarly, the empowerment of students could result in an uncomfortable re-balancing of the sensitive relationship between them and academic staff which in turn created the need for an external regulating body (such as the QAA) ‘to protect the interests of “vulnerable” consumers against “exploitative” academics’ (Williams: 2013: 49).

CHAPTER 11: DISCOURSES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

‘The politics of governance in higher education is dominated by a discourse of quality which assumes the external regulation of academic activity to be the natural and acceptable state of affairs’ (Salter and Tapper, 2000: 82).

11.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together recurring themes in the history of quality assurance that crystallised into a number of ‘discourses’ which preoccupied the higher education sector throughout the 1990s and beyond. Summarising the different points of view that contributed to these discourses has helped to construct a composite picture of the origins, operation and impacts of quality assurance.

11.2 Discourses

11.2.1 Definitions

The word ‘discourse’ has a number of dictionary definitions all relating to expression in speech or writing and its use to exchange ideas. For the purposes of this study, the following definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary* has been adopted:

Discourse:

The body of statements, analysis, opinions, etc., relating to a particular domain of intellectual or social activity, especially as characterized by recurring themes, concepts, or values; (also) the set of shared beliefs, values, etc., implied or expressed by this (OED On-line, 2013).

By extension the OED also lists ‘discourse community’, defined as ‘a group of people sharing a common and distinct mode of communication or discourse, especially within a particular domain of intellectual or social activity’. This aptly describes the diverse groups of people appearing in the history of quality assurance who developed their own vocabularies to express their varying points of view. This study has attempted to present the emerging discourses through the voices of these participants, augmented by the retrospective views of the interviewees who experienced the events at first hand.

The importance of different discourses was emphasised by the contributors to a book edited by Barnett (1994) about contemporary challenges to the concept of ‘academic community in an age of post-modernity’. They examined the problems of communication

both inside and outside universities in a period when modern society appeared to be ‘fragmenting’ and with it the ‘discourses of academe’ (Barnett, 1994: 18). Reeves (1994: 123-4) observed a tendency of academics in the competitive world of scholarship to use the specialist languages of their disciplines not to promote communication but ‘increasingly as a means of staking out a claim to a particular territory’. She identified a serious challenge to traditional academia in the prevalent view that a reader’s interpretation had become more important than the author’s intended meaning, with a resulting reduction of academic authority.

11.2.2 The discourse of quality

Graham and Barnett (1996: 172) argued that the concept of a ‘discourse’ went beyond discussion to include practices used to ‘confer legitimacy on certain power relations’ which would then vie for dominance with earlier values, policies and practices, thus creating conflict. They therefore extended the meaning of ‘discourse’ to cover the development of policies leading to legislation and the systems set up to implement it. Analysing the extent of the state’s influence on the regulation of higher education they emphasised the importance of the creation and management of what they called the ‘discourse of quality’ in which issues of accountability and quality which were high on the wider political agenda had become key issues for debate in higher education (Graham and Barnett, 1996: 172). This debate included the use of quality assurance as an instrument of regulation imposed through legislation and the creation of new institutions to enforce it. One of Morley’s interviewees on the new régime of quality assurance summed up this process: ‘quality [had] been inserted into the dominant discourse’ (Morley, 2003: 52).

11.3 *The languages of quality*

This thesis has demonstrated that the complex discourses of quality contained many ‘voices’ expressing diverse points of view, both official and unofficial, and in many different kinds of language. Early on, McNay (1992: 17) described the ‘culture shock’ that occurred during the second half of the 1980s when ‘words and concepts had their meanings changed’. The speed with which the new language took over was disconcerting: Salter and Tapper (2000) observed that the language of quality was dominating the higher education discourse by 1995. Morley (2003: viii) explained how ‘quality’ had become a keyword in the public services and had undergone a process of ‘conceptual inflation’ which invested it

with an implication of ‘improvement’ and was thus expected to evoke a positive response. As anthropologists, Shore and Wright (1999) drew attention to how changing patterns of language could signal political, cultural and social change. They highlighted ‘new semantic clusters’ of words which became the core vocabularies of developments in higher education such as quality assurance, performance measurement and corporate styles of management. To illustrate the proliferation of these new terminologies they signalled the key words in inverted commas in their text. These semantic shifts were hard to accept for those unfamiliar with the new language.

11.3.1 Political rhetoric

The documentary sources used for this study were peppered with the buzzwords of the government’s ideology, described by Harker (1995: 33) as ‘the five Es of Thatcherism: economy, efficiency, effectiveness, enterprise; and excellence’ which underpinned the régime of accountability being applied to the whole of the public sector. The requirements of quality assurance were first communicated to the higher education sector in the cool uncompromising language of circulars, off-putting to the uninitiated to whom the practical implications were not always immediately obvious. Power (1994 and 1997) and others analysed how the creation of the Audit Commission in 1983 had led to the expansion of the activity of audit and its language beyond its original financial sphere to cover service quality all across the public sector. Thus the word ‘audit’ had invaded ‘virtually every field of modern working life’ (Shore and Wright, 1999: 58) and Salter and Tapper (2000: 70) noted how the language of economics and management was displacing previous concepts of public service such as “professionalism”, “administration” and “the public interest”’. As Graham and Barnett (1994: 171) put it, ‘the language of reform [was] used to conceptualise and to name the desired dimensions of quality’. Barnett recalled in his interview that a new phraseology was coming into the public services from the mid 1980s onwards: *‘the word “accountability” was becoming heavily used and the phrase “value for money” was becoming very powerful at that time’* (I: 8). One of Hart’s criticisms (1997: 296) was ‘the utter vacuity’ of much of the language used, as if restricting the discussion to ‘quality-in-the-abstract’ would avoid the need to engage in evidence-based arguments. The universities soon learned to crack the code of such euphemisms as ‘efficiency savings’ which actually denoted budget cuts and to understand the rhetoric of the political mantras which professed respect for university autonomy and confidence in the quality of UK higher education, though the accompanying communications conveyed messages to the contrary.

11.3.2 Industrial origins and the jargon of quality assurance

Reflecting on the previous decade, Cameron (2003: 136) recalled her surprise at how suddenly the language of quality assurance had migrated from its original industrial setting into higher education during the early 1990s: ‘in its original context, factory production, QA involves setting up procedures to ensure that every item that rolls off the production line meets the specifications for the product in general... This is also what it has come to mean in British higher education’.

Reinforcing the parallel with manufacturing where quality control was maintained by rigorous testing of products against prescribed and precisely measurable standards, assessment of the quality of education was increasingly described in terms of ‘productivity targets’ measuring progress towards ‘cost-effective policy outcomes’ (Ball: 2003: 218). Teaching and learning processes were described in terms of ‘learning outcomes’ so that they could be measured and scored for the purposes of comparison. According to Shore and Wright (1999: 567) the learning experience itself had to be ‘increasingly bureaucratized, standardized and quantified, the new philosophy being that what cannot be measured [was] of little value’. University staff had to contend with a new vocabulary of audit and assessment and a further problem was the frequent introduction of new terminology as the processes for assessment and grading were changed. Table 3.9 on page 61 summarises the principal stages in this process.

Interviewee 2 described the resentment this caused among academics struggling to implement the changing systems: *‘When the TQA started we were confronted by the huge set of expressions and terminology and we didn’t know at all what they were (I: 2).* Barnett emphasised the level of detail that was demanded in describing the courses: *‘we had another new set of terms, a new language around “learning outcomes”, such that every course had to be specified under certain kinds of headings and made transparent in that way’ (I: 8).*

Underwood (1998: 52) pointed out that the language of the assessment reports issued by HEFCE and subsequently the QAA was not always clear to the recipients. After his retirement from the QAA in 2009, Williams (I: 9) acknowledged that, for a number of reasons, there had always been difficulties with quality assurance reports. These had been criticised for being ‘coded, hard to understand, jargon-ridden and too long’ and the

language used by the QAA could be obscure (Williams, 2009: 26). In its defence, however, he argued that such a technical assessment exercise would inevitably develop its own specialist vocabulary and it was important not to compromise the complex content of the reports by over-simplifying the language.

11.3.3 ‘Marketisation’ and self-promotion

The trend towards what Fairclough (1993) termed the ‘marketisation’ of higher education entailing competition for students as ‘customers’ had been ‘decked out in the language of the market and customer-contractor relationships’ (Johnson, 1994: 375). The extension of corporate management required universities to produce what Ball (2003: 225) referred to as ‘a variety of formal textual accounts of themselves,’ such as mission statements, corporate plans and annual reports which increasingly took on the function of self-promotion. In an article called ‘Mission Impenetrable’ (2001) Cameron explained the ‘vacuous generality’ of the self-assessment documents submitted by departments in advance of QAA visits by identifying ‘the promotional purpose behind them’. Under pressure to present a generally rosy picture of the universities, ‘a whole generation of academics [had] become fluent in a public language of self-promotion,’ (Cameron, 2001: 102): they were writing what the QAA or the Funding Councils wanted to hear. She mocked the banal prose constantly being produced in attempts to market their universities and proposed some more striking advertising slogans – ‘Cambridge University: because you’re worth it’.

11.3.4 Public relations

Like all public organisations, the universities increasingly had to think about their public image. It was not only politicians who took a negative view of academia: one of the problems for universities in resisting the government reforms was that they did not have the majority of public opinion on their side. The student unrest of the late 1960s had had a long-lasting negative effect on public attitudes to higher education. Johnson (1994: 384) commented that ‘British universities and the academic professions had not been good at persuading the people of the importance and value of what they do, nor have they shown much courage in standing up to those who would foist damaging policies upon them’. From the initiation of the ‘quality debate’ by the *THES* in January 1993, the press played a significant role in commenting on, and sometimes fomenting, discord.

11.3.5 Dialogues of the deaf

Different groups of academics accepted the many languages of quality assurance with varying degrees of tolerance. Henkel's research (2000) revealed that members of university senior management and educational support units who had responsibility for quality assurance were more likely to enter into this new discourse than academics at departmental level. Morley (2003: 70) described the compulsion to use the language of quality assurance as a 'damaging process of ventriloquism and impersonation as academics and managers attempt to represent themselves in a language that quality assessors will understand and value', while Shore and Wright (1999) concluded that some academic staff responsible for quality assurance at first became 'bilingual', then in a short time the language of audit would come to dominate. The strain of having to adopt this unnatural mode of communication meant that in time many of them were suffering from 'quality fatigue' (Henkel, 2000: 85). When quality assurance was first introduced, Barnett (1992: 5) had perceptively observed that the number of different interests involved in higher education would be likely to inhibit the exchange of ideas and mutual understanding. It was therefore not surprising that the ensuing discourses about quality often ended up as dialogues of the deaf.

11.4 *Discourses of quality assurance in higher education*

11.4.1 Emerging discourses

Identifying the themes which have emerged in this study gradually led to an understanding that the opposing arguments about quality assurance were in fact elements of an overarching discourse between the government's agenda on the one hand and the traditional aims and values of universities on the other. These are broadly categorised in Table 11.1 below. Although the poles of disagreement between the government and the universities were not always so clear cut, juxtaposing them in this way enabled me to identify some emerging answers to my original research questions about the origins of quality assurance, how it operated and what were its impacts on the higher education sector.

Table 11.1 Discourses of quality assurance

<i>Government agenda</i>	<i>'Traditional' university values</i>
State control	University independence
Higher education for the economy	Higher education for culture and society
Research	University teaching
Accountability	Improvement
The 'audit explosion'	Loss of trust
Managerialism and performativity	Self-regulation and peer review
Higher education as a 'market'	Higher education as a 'public good'
Value for money	The costs of quality assurance

11.4.2 State control v. university independence

In investigating the origins of quality assurance, the first questions focused on how far the government's reforms in higher education in the 1980s and early 1990s originated from a general aim to bring the regulation of higher education into line with the rest of the public sector, or whether there were specific factors driving a desire for greater state control over the universities. The discussion in chapters 4 and 5 demonstrated that during the 1980s there was indeed growing pressure to enforce the government's policies of accountability, efficiency and value for money on the previously independent traditional universities as well as on other public services. Without doubt 'the shift towards greater accountability and corporate mechanisms were all part of the general shift in public services' (Kogan and Hanney, 2000: 186). However, a number of specific concerns about the quality of education in the traditional universities were also identified, particularly pressure to maintain standards and to produce graduates qualified to contribute to the economy. The government's motivation was clear. As Williams later reflected, 'the structure and function of quality assurance are generally determined in order to satisfy political objectives, and both reflect, and help to consolidate, the ownership and control of higher education' (Williams, 2009: 2).

The Higher Education Acts of 1988 and 1992 and ensuing structural changes enshrined quality assurance as an important instrument for reform. Academic audit ensured the checking of systems throughout the sector while individual subject assessments were a way of holding universities to account for the quality of their teaching and, at the same time, of informing the choices of prospective students. Many civil servants welcomed the

strengthening of the regulatory systems. After the failure of early attempts by the CVCP to protect higher education from state intervention, resistance to quality assurance by the universities became the focus of a long-running discourse in which the government assumed 'the external regulation of academic activity to be the natural and acceptable state of affairs' (Salter and Tapper 2000: 82). The effects of this struggle were sufficiently important for Morley (2003: vii) to describe the introduction of the 'quality discourse' into higher education as 'an example of the changing relations between universities and the state'

11.4.3 Higher education for the economy v. higher education for culture and society

Earlier chapters highlighted the adoption by the UK government and European Commission from the 1980s onwards of the controversial premise that a primary aim of higher education was to maximise its contribution to the economy. The growing influence of this 'economic ideology of education,' on politicians and civil servants became one of the major tenets of their reform programme (Salter and Tapper 2000: 67) and the responsibility of universities to produce graduates for industry, stated unequivocally in successive White Papers and legislation from 1985-1992, led to a wish to scrutinise the quality and standards of the education that was actually being delivered by the universities.

This instrumentalist approach enshrined in legislation presented a serious challenge to many of the beliefs of traditional universities. Not only was higher education expected to prepare graduates for industry, but the universities perceived that the industrial origins of quality assurance itself were converting higher education into a national mass production process with graduates as its 'products'. The 'quality industry' became a major issue in the quality debate: in Morley's telling phrase (2003: ix) 'higher education [had] been metaphorically floated on the stock exchange'. The new ideology was hotly contested by academics concerned at the growing influence of industry over the curriculum and ethos of universities. Over time, it had also become apparent that commercial motives could actually be threatening to quality. As higher education became part of a global market, the pressures of international competition meant that 'educational values and quality of service' were sometimes sacrificed in the interests of marketing (Marginson, 1993: 54) and the resulting complaints from the target countries provoked political anxieties about loss of confidence in UK degrees.

Chapter 4 recognised that the economic priority and corporate values being promoted by the Thatcher government were far from the ‘humanistic view of a university’ which had persisted from the 19th century until the Robbins Report of 1963. By the 1990s, the overall discourse had changed profoundly. As Johnson (1994: 370) summed up:

‘Universities are today widely regarded as but part of the production process, their existence justified by the capacity to turn out graduates trained to make an effective contribution to the economy and their success in delivering knowledge and techniques relevant to wealth generation’.

The views of two interviewees for this study represented the opposing poles of this discourse. Williams believed that, despite protestations to the contrary, the government was ‘*not at all interested in the nature of knowledge and scholarship and continuity of culture and so on, all those traditional virtues and values of higher education*’. He regretted that the dominant focus of higher education was now largely ‘*about advanced training... training for jobs*’ (I: 9). In contrast, Interviewee 6, a former civil servant and vice-chancellor of a post-92 university, felt it important to recognise that ‘*the ultimate goal of most of the students who come to post-92 universities is to get a job in the subject that they’ve studied*’ and he regarded supporting graduates into employment as ‘*the single most important measure of the university’s achievement*’ (I: 6).

11.4.4 Research v. university teaching

University research was an important element of the government’s policy of encouraging higher education to link with industry in order to boost the economy and to enhance the UK’s reputation abroad. A further key principle – the idea that the level of funding for public agencies should depend on their performance – was extended to UK higher education through the RAE introduced in 1986. Its purpose was to provide a mechanism for determining the level of research funding to be awarded to the UK universities by the Funding Councils. In a peer review process, panels of subject specialists produced ratings of research quality in all subject areas, with funding allocated accordingly on a competitive basis. Extending this principle to teaching quality, the Secretary of State for Education’s initial letter of guidance to HEFCE directed that the Funding Council would need ‘in particular, to ensure that the outcomes of assessment visits are in a form which can be used to inform funding allocations’ (HEFCE, 1992).

The operation of these two systems side by side – both under the authority of the Funding Councils, both imposing a considerable workload on staff, but with the crucial difference

that funding levels depended on one and not on the other – gave rise to major tensions in the sector. A report for HEFCE by McNay (1997) on the impact of the 1992 RAE on higher education identified an overall increase in stress and the reduction in ‘collegiality’ caused by designating some academic staff and not others as ‘research active’ (HEFCE, 1997: 1). One widespread effect of the pressure to obtain research funding was that the most able and experienced scholars often devoted themselves to research at the expense of teaching. The resulting necessity to recruit inexperienced and temporary staff in order to free up active researchers, resulted in ‘casualisation’ of the teaching staff which risked a reduction in its quality. Henkel’s research (2000: 96) revealed the continued primacy of research: ‘institutional reputations and funding rested overwhelmingly on their research records. And so did those of individual academics’. Morley (2003: 1) put it more starkly: ‘on the one hand, teaching is being reduced to the dispensation of credentials; on the other, research is being privatised as intellectual property: the one is being driven by the employment market, the other by the futures market’. The 2003 White Paper and budgetary increases introduced in the 2004 Higher Education Act expressed government intentions to reward good teaching at departmental level and to promote best practice but there was a long way to go.

11.4.5 Accountability v. improvement

Another major aim of the government’s reforms, emphasised in legislation, was to hold public organisations accountable both for the money they received and for the quality of the education they delivered. Harvey and Knight (1996: 38) judged that ‘the development of quality policy and practice in the United Kingdom has been a pragmatic procedure guided by political imperatives. The political imperative that has overridden all others is the ideological commitment to accountability in the public sector’. Jackson (1997: 174) agreed that quality assurance was ‘politically motivated for reasons of accountability’ and indeed Kogan and Hanney (2000) believed that the quality assurance was the most important element among the various forms of accountability imposed on higher education during this period. Institutions and academics were now explicitly accountable to ‘the public’ and to ‘the taxpayer’, which, as Shore and Wright (1999) pointed out, often meant the Funding Councils and through them the government, as well as to their students and other stakeholders. As the former Chief Executive of HEFCE summed up, ‘*with public funding over the last 20 years, one of the biggest shifts has been the public expectation that those who receive public money will be accountable*’ (I: 1). The analysis of the quality ‘debate’ in this study has shown that most academics tended to accept the case for public

accountability on principle but nevertheless continued to resist the more intrusive and demanding aspects of quality assurance in practice.

Though one of the stated purposes of quality assessment was improvement, an aim which academics might have been expected to support, the problem was to achieve it within the systems designed by HEFCE for the measurement of quality which prioritised regulation over improvement. Indeed, from the very beginning tensions between the principles of accountability and improvement arose as practitioners in the UK and elsewhere began to experience the difficulties of combining them in one system. As Interviewee 2 explained, he favoured the motive of improvement but thought it could rarely be achieved: *'of course the idea of emphasising enhancement is a good one – of course it is – but QA isn't really about that... It's about filling in forms and doing the right thing'* (I: 2). Blackmore (2009: 861) neatly described the gap between the two approaches:

'Evaluation for improvement focuses on identifying what worked, how and why it worked, and how performance can be improved. Evaluation for accountability focuses on the processes and outcomes: the visible and the measurable, tracking the paper trails to predetermined outcomes.'

Yorke (1995: 27-28) explained the challenges of establishing suitable performance indicators to serve the dual purposes of what he referred to as 'the Siamese twins' of external accountability (mainly to do with student throughput and costs) and improvement (focusing on the effectiveness of teaching and learning). In his view, 'performance indicators [served] neither accountability nor enhancement alone'. Vroeijenstijn (1995) had characterised the clashing extremes of accountability and enhancement in the Netherlands as 'Scylla and Charybdis' but believed it should be possible to reconcile them within a regulatory system. However, Williams disagreed: *'I think it's very very difficult because accountability puts pressures on institutions and individuals which reduce their candour and you cannot improve unless you're going to be rather candid. So it's about honesty, and accountability doesn't encourage honesty unless the penalties are very high! Enhancement demands a willingness to say, "I'm not very good. How can I be better?" You never say that to an external accreditor or an external quality assessor. Why would you because they would say it's not very good?'* (I: 9).

Earlier chapters have reported the negative effects of over-bureaucratic external assessment which occupied precious time that might otherwise have been devoted to developing ways of improving their practice. Dill (1998) emphasised the need to calculate the opportunity cost of such exercises while Knight and Trowler (2000: 112) reflected: 'compliance can be

compelled for a price ... but creativity, conscientiousness and chutzpah cannot’.

Interviewee 10 had clear views about the necessary balance between accountability and enhancement: *‘My argument always is that you need a mixture of accountability and enhancement... The benefits of having an external regulator ought to be that you get some idea of how your practice compares with other practice of which they’re aware’* so that comparison could lead to improvement. He regretted, however, that *‘the regulatory emphasis, the accountability emphasis tends to kind of drive that out really* (I: 10).

Newton (1999: 231) agreed that staff tended to view the quality assurance system as more ‘accountability-led’ than ‘improvement-led’ and expressed concern that the pressures of external regulation could mean that ‘the exigencies of accountability ... become paramount, outweighing quality enhancement efforts’. Jackson (1997: 171) emphasised that ‘any regulatory régime must attempt to balance the goals of accountability and improvement’ and concluded that ‘the accountability function’ had been largely achieved. However, while the government’s determination to regulate had improved systems, it had also caused strong resistance from academics. The current need, therefore, was to achieve ‘a strong developmental focus’ to improve the quality of education (Jackson, 1997: 165).

Chapter 8 of this study has pointed out how far this goal was from being achieved, even after the fusion of quality audit and assessment functions into the QAA. The emphasis on improvement was largely lost with the abolition of the HEQC in 1997 and the strongly regulatory approach of the QAA’s new chief executive. Despite the changes in 2001 which led to a ‘lighter touch’, the aim for improvement remained subservient to accountability. A decade after the introduction of quality assurance, Brown (2004: 162) persuasively argued that the percentage of programmes falling below the accepted standard remained minuscule so it was time to use public resources to promote improvement rather than to regulate: ‘accountability is a dead end and should be replaced, as the main purpose of quality assurance, by quality improvement’. However, several years later this desirable outcome seemed no nearer. Harvey and Williams (2010: 24) confirmed that, except in Scotland which had followed a different path towards ‘enhancement’ (see Appendix 4), there was still an ongoing tension in the discourse between ‘quality assurance as a bureaucratic and administrative task and the improvement of the quality of academic endeavours’.

11.4.6 'The audit explosion' v. loss of trust

A further discourse related to quality assurance focused on the relationship between external scrutiny of the quality of services and the loss of trust in the professionals who provided them. Much of this thesis has explored the effects of quality assurance measures on the working life of academics.

Power's essay *The Audit Explosion* (1994) and its sequel *The Audit Society* (1999) contained a penetrating analysis of the philosophy and processes of audit which were making an impact across the public sector¹⁶. He emphasised the difficulties of measuring quality in complex service organisations such as health and education where the challenge of auditing 'effectiveness' caused an inevitable drift towards 'managing by numbers' (Power 1997: 115). The difficulty of making a measurable connection between service activities and long-term outcomes then led to a tendency to measure quality by short-term quantifiable outputs such as examination results or patient waiting times, or easily auditable *inputs* such as costs. Furthermore, external audit usually focused on an organisation's systems rather than the activity itself. The imposition of pre-established standards and targets was fundamentally inimical to the embedded principle of diversity in UK higher education and to the pedagogical aims of creativity and open-ended goals in learning.

Power (1999: 68) highlighted higher education quality assurance systems 'where the distinction between good teaching and good systems of monitoring teaching are blurred'. Increasing levels of administrative expertise were required to understand the layers of complexity proliferating within 'the black box' of audit as internal controls were introduced to back up the external systems. This negative approach gained an entry as no. 6 in Charles Handy's list of 'Rules for Stifling Initiative': 'Control everything carefully, make sure people count anything that can be counted, frequently' (Handy, 1985: 142). Referring to the transfer of this culture to higher education, Strathern (1997: 305) warned that this kind of audit 'does more than monitor – it has a life of its own that jeopardizes the life it audits'. The damaging effects on staff of the punitive approach to quality audit highlighted in chapter 9 confirmed her judgement.

¹⁶ Note that Power used the word 'audit' as a general term for external scrutiny which may be taken to include both 'audit' and 'assessment' when applied to the quality assurance processes in higher education.

During the 1990s many commentators drew attention to the developing discourse between increasing external scrutiny of public organisations and loss of trust in professionals. In the first of her Reith Lectures, *A Question of Trust* (2002), Onora O'Neill analysed this prevailing 'culture of suspicion' arising from loss of trust in public services which she described as 'a cliché of our times'. She argued that, in an effort to restore confidence, audit had been widely introduced to replace traditional forms of professional accountability. However, far from restoring public trust, performance measures in the form of targets, audits and league tables were counter-productive, not only distracting professionals from their 'real work' but actually distorting their practice and damaging their professional pride and integrity. Power (1994: 10) commented on one of the serious potential consequences of the rise of audit: 'if those engaged in everyday work are not trusted, then the locus of trust shifts to the experts involved in policing them'. He further pointed out the irony of a situation where the rise of the audit culture had caused 'a shift from professions the public trusts more such as doctors, police and teachers, to a profession the public trusts less (the accountants) at the instigation of a profession it trusts least (the politicians)' (Power, 1994: 27). The proliferation of auditors, assessors, managers and administrators involved in the quality assurance processes was an example of this trend.

Close involvement in the implementation of quality assurance enabled several interviewees in this study to comment on various aspects of this loss of trust. From his perspective in a pre-92 university, Interviewee 2 identified '*the collapse that was occurring in similar bodies of the sort of trust that existed in the days of the UGC*' (I: 2). From a civil service perspective, Kelly had identified in the Thatcher and Major governments '*a sort of ... hostility to embedded interest groups*' whom the government suspected of wishing '*to subvert every initiative for change and improvement that ministers came up with*' (I: 3). He attributed the unusually detailed legislation introducing quality assurance to a belief by the government and civil servants '*that people wouldn't do it unless you absolutely told them that they must*' (I: 3). Williams spoke of '*the business of civil servants not trusting you, for whatever reason ...*' (I: 9).

For academics previously used to a considerable degree of autonomy, this was a major issue. Shore and Wright (1997: 566) identified the damaging effects of 'this panopticon model of accountability' where 'audit encourages the displacement of a system based on autonomy and trust by one based on visibility and coercive accountability.' Morley (2003:100) recognised 'a discourse of loss' in academic life, in which practical effects such as loss of autonomy in teaching and reduced control over working time were accompanied

by loss of trust. Kogan and Hanney (2000: 32) reflected that the self-governing systems of external examiners and peer review had been based on a 'trustful relationship' between government and higher education which recognised that academics were professionally competent to make judgements about 'quality'. However, times had changed. Issues of trust and mistrust appeared in several of the contributions to Strathern's book on *Audit Cultures* (2000) where the point was made that in theory 'checking only becomes necessary in situations of mistrust' (Strathern, 2000: 6).

The daily evidence of this lack of confidence in academics was in direct conflict with the much parroted government mantra about respect for university autonomy. As an example of this, paragraph 3.5 of the 1987 White Paper both asserted this view and then sternly undermined it with a further threat of government intervention:

'Quality in higher education depends primarily upon the commitment of the academic community to the maintenance and improvement of standards. This cannot be created or imposed from outside, but the Government on behalf of the public can and will seek to ensure that systems are in place to promote and give effect to that commitment and to monitor the results' (DES, 1987: para 3.5).

An inevitable corollary to being thus mistrusted was that many academics in turn lost trust in the government and the public agencies whom they identified as the originators of this corrosive culture. This contributed to the change in the relationship between the universities and the state.

11.4.7 Managerialism and performativity v. self-regulation and peer review

'Managerialism' in the universities was defined by Kogan and Hanney (2000: 186) as 'the shift in power from senior academics and their departments to the central institution and the dominance of systems over academic values'. The new structures, systems and staff needed to handle the operation of quality assurance led to the creation of a 'parallel universe' (Shore and Wright, 1999: 270) which over time gave rise to a new internal discourse between academics and managers. The divisive effects of the transfer of power to administrators – the '*Faustian pact*' referred to by Williams (I: 9) – with the consequent dissociation of academics from quality assurance were described in chapter 9. Supporters of quality assurance such as Williams himself regarded this failure of large numbers of the academic community to engage constructively with it as a lost opportunity to achieve educational improvements. Chapter 9 also identified the culture of 'performativity' which extended measurement to all staff activities including assessment of teaching. The much

criticised quantifiable performance indicators designed to give the government ‘the comfort of numbers’ (Morley, 2003: 127) supplanted qualitative judgements which most academics would have considered more appropriate for the personal interactions of learning and teaching. From his own experience at QAA Scotland, Sharp (I: 4) explained the opposing discourses between the academic objections to numerical grading systems and the government’s demand for public information. *‘Higher education was bedevilled on the one hand by groups of people who not unreasonably ... think “Look, this is quite simple if you’ll just tell us in simple terms which is the best university and which university should I go to and what should I study there?” ’*. To satisfy this public demand, the Funding Councils sought concrete information from the universities: *‘it should be straightforward: ... we just want you to tell us, give us a score, or give us something that will tell the public how good this is’* (I: 4). But many universities responded with understandable reluctance and the QAA was caught in the middle attempting to mediate between the two points of view by explaining the immense complexity of measuring quality. This friction between quantifiable and qualitative measures was at the heart of the ongoing conflict between the universities and the government. Paradoxically, while the government continued to promote diversity of aims within universities, they were also still insisting on systems of quality measurement that were likely to encourage uniformity. One of the later objections to the QAA’s imposition of standards and benchmarking was that this approach could inhibit innovation and creativity in teaching (Redding, 2005).

Before 1992 the traditional universities had fulfilled their responsibilities for self-regulation through systems of ‘collaborative regulation’ such as peer review and external examining which Jackson (1997: 174) identified as a distinguishing feature of UK higher education. The involvement of academic colleagues from other universities protecting quality and standards through their role as external examiners in subject areas was described by Harvey (1995: 263) as ‘the mainstay of higher education standards’. By 1992 the government had deemed that these trusted systems based on peer involvement alone were no longer sufficient for the greatly enlarged and much more diverse university sector, especially once the regulatory systems operated in the polytechnics by the CNAA and HMI had been abolished. The new systems of quality assurance were therefore deemed necessary. According to the former Chief Executive of HEFCE, this decision was based on the government’s *‘clear lack of awareness that here was a system which was very comfortable with scrutiny – you couldn’t ever argue that they weren’t comfortable with scrutiny’* (I: 1). Hence the importance that participation by academic peers should be

retained as a key element in the systems of quality audit and assessment brought in after 1992.

Jackson (1997: 168) believed that the replacement of professional systems of self-evaluation based on trust by the new ‘accountability-based administrative and market-oriented systems’ under managerialist control had been inevitable in the transition to a greatly enlarged higher education system but that they were detrimental to academics’ professionalism and self-confidence. As chapter 8 demonstrated, the long-running dispute between the government and the universities in the lead-up to the Joint Planning Group centred on the government’s lack of trust in the universities to operate independent self-regulation. The universities lost that battle and the quality assurance systems remained under government control with this fundamental conflict unresolved.

11.4.8 Higher education as a market v. higher education as a public good

The growth of the higher education as a ‘market’ described in chapter 10 gave rise to a discourse in which universities and academics played the part of ‘service providers’ while students were paying customers exercising their choice. Despite their increasingly influential role as evaluators of the quality of their education, it could not be assumed that a higher education market aiming to fulfil customers’ wishes would necessarily result in the delivery of ‘high education standards and consistent quality’ (Salter and Tapper, 1998: 32). In fact students might opt for a lower quality product, perhaps cheaper and less demanding, provided that it offered the prospect of a job.

The concept of higher education as a market raised fundamental questions about the purpose of quality assurance. Jackson (1997: 173) pointed out a contradiction in principle between the concept of a free market driven by competition and choice and the government-imposed quality assurance dictated by demands of accountability. He argued that organisations needed to innovate to survive in a competitive market, whereas regulation was likely to inhibit innovation and competition. Salter and Tapper (2000: 70) agreed there was a paradox in this model in which the government was ‘using the principles of consumerism and the market to invigorate the economic ideology of education whilst preserving its ability to legitimate state regulation’.

Shackleton (1996) wondered whether regulation in the form of quality assurance was necessary at all ‘in a higher education system increasingly dominated by the values of the

competition and the market place,' where students were having to pay fees. Citing the independence of producers in a commercial market to vary their products in response to customer demands, he argued that universities should offer more flexible choices to students and abandon 'the costly straitjacket of quality assurance with which British universities have been afflicted' (*THES*, 24 June 1996). In his interview Barnett similarly questioned '*whether or not one needs a national evaluation system if one is marketising the system. In a market, does one need a heavily bureaucratic national evaluation system? Shouldn't one simply let the market decide as to what it wants and means by quality?*' (I: 8).

Based on the 'contract' between them, university education became a 'product' to be purchased by individual students rather than a 'public good' contributing to the benefit of society. As chapter 10 pointed out, the motivation of many students in the 1990s was personal: a university education was seen as an investment in their future. It was perfectly understandable that students, particularly on the vocational courses which dominated the post-92 universities, would be motivated to enter higher education primarily as a means of gaining employment. Chapter 10 also mentioned Dearing's recognition of students as 'investors' (NCIHE, 1997, 22: para 19) and Kelly's idea that within this framework, a university arguably became '*basically a retailer of degrees*' (I. 3). However Sharp rejected this overall concept of higher education as a market: '*It's not a consumer industry. There are elements of consumerism in it and of course the more people are paying, the more these elements are there and students have a right to certain things because that is what they're 'buying' or the government is 'buying' for them. But that's not the nature of higher education. It's about the generation of knowledge*' (I. 4). Tasker and Packham (1993:134) summed up the gulf between the commercial model and traditional university values.

'The purpose of industry is to generate profit for private gain... The concept of public good is not central to industry's concerns. The purpose of higher education is to generate knowledge through collaboration between scholars, not competition, and in such a way that society as a whole benefits'.

Gibbs (2001: 85) identified problems in attempting 'to shift public opinion from the benefits of higher education as a contributor to society's social and moral well-being, to one of skills given value by an economic market'. Though learners might acquire the necessary skills and qualifications to gain employment within the market, they were unlikely to gain the 'cultural, moral and humanitarian understanding' which would engender a desire and ability to contribute to the wider society (Gibbs, 2001: 88). Regret

that this kind of education was moving from being a ‘public good’ to being for individual benefit was shared by Brown (2004: 3) who drew attention to the tendency of the government ‘to treat higher education as if it were a private good’. Redding (2005: 412) argued that society as a whole should be thought of as the ‘ultimate customer’ of higher education, both in terms of producing a better-educated workforce and, more broadly, because ‘the notion of democracy and culture has always been linked to an educated populace’. Williams (2013) identified the growth of ‘the knowledge economy’ under the Conservative government since 1979 in which knowledge had become a valuable commodity accumulated by individuals for their own benefit. Summing up this conflicting discourse, Peter Williams believed higher education was ‘*no longer perceived as a public good, whether in terms of its economic role in building national prosperity or its social role in including all of society into a coherent cultural vision*’ (I: 9).

11.4.9 Value for money v. the costs of quality assurance

The requirement of higher education to be cost-effective and the promotion of value for money were pillars of government policy. It is strange, therefore, that though complaints about the costs of quality assurance from universities, reviewers and external critics have been a recurring theme throughout this narrative, these costs were rarely examined and never accurately calculated. Even groups commissioned with that specific remit such as the Joint Planning Group (1996) and PA Consulting (2000) declared themselves unable to produce anything more than ‘guesstimates’. The lack of effort from the beginning to try to calculate the overall costs of quality assurance severely limited the possibility of judging whether or not the whole exercise represented value for money.

Previous chapters have described how front-line academics particularly resented quality-related expenditure on additional administrative staff, new central teaching and learning centres and later on marketing budgets to boost their position in the rankings, particularly when this became part of universities’ central budgets top-sliced from departmental funding (Underwood 2000 and 2002).

As time passed, stronger calls for a systematic analysis of costs were made on the grounds that this lack of financial reporting amounted to a failure of accountability (Dill, 1998, Underwood, 2000, Harrison and Lockwood, 2001). Brown (2004: 85) expressed astonishment that so little effort had been made to calculate these costs accurately and

viewed this as ‘the strongest criticism of assessment’. The Dearing Report itself (1997, 10:8) speculated that ‘it [might] not be the best of use of scarce resources to continue the system in the long term’. This failure to address the question of costs was an anomaly in the prevailing audit culture and undoubtedly left the system vulnerable to public criticism. The total of £250 million estimated by PA Consulting as the annual cost to the sector of quality assurance was reported under the sensationalised headline ‘Millions go down drain in audit fiasco’ (*THES*, 4 August 2000).

The downplaying of costs by individuals involved in the quality assurance systems was based partly on the complexity of calculation and partly on the lack of adequate records. One major problem was the difficulty in calculating the administrative costs, particularly the opportunity cost of academics’ time which could have been more profitably devoted to teaching or research. From HEFCE’s point of view, Interviewee 1 emphasised these difficulties and suggested that perhaps it was not desirable to cost quality assurance activities separately because they should be considered as part of an academic’s job description: *‘you don’t want to know the cost because actually being properly compliant and doing things well and having it evaluated should be built into the day-to-day way in which you do your job and in the commercial industrial world it is’* (I: 1). Sharp, as former director of QAA Scotland, agreed that in terms of the total spend on higher education in Scotland *‘the amount that goes on quality is peanuts and very much less than anything ... that any industry would spend on quality assurance. It is very very cheap’*. He fully accepted the need for rigorous evaluation of the quality assurance systems but was not over-concerned that the main focus of the reviews to date had not been on costs. This view was not based on *‘a kind of ostrich-like behaviour and not thinking that money doesn’t matter. Increasingly money matters an awful lot and every penny you put into quality work you’re taking away from frontline services’*. However, he argued that attempting to produce a formal cost/benefit analysis would be counter-productive: *‘you’d get driven back to kind of simplistic calculations, looking at differences ...in drop-outs for example, and trying to turn that into money terms. And you’re still not certain that these are causative’* (I: 4).

11.5 Summary

Juxtaposing these opposing ‘discourses’ in this way demonstrates that quality assurance was a crucial element in the Conservative government’s higher education reforms in both policy and practice. Its industrial origins supported the aims of efficiency and value for

money and its regulatory mechanisms became a means of enforcing management control as well as demonstrating accountability to the tax payer. The potential to improve the quality of higher education was stifled by the government's emphasis on the regulation agenda. Assessment of quality was also a key feature in the marketisation of higher education in which students became paying customers encouraged the instrumental view that the main aim of education was to lead to employment. Questions about the cost of quality assurance and whether it delivered value for money became a highly contentious aspect of the whole quality debate. Understanding these numerous conflicts that arose in the sector is an important factor in identifying the specific impacts of quality assurance and reaching judgements about its overall effects.

CHAPTER 12: WEIGHING UP THE IMPACTS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

‘Ultimately ... it is still not clear that, even after 15 years, quality assurance systems have really enhanced higher education’ (Harvey and Williams, 2010: 81).

12.1 Introduction

The stages of this study so far have included a chronological account of the origins and implementation of quality assurance from 1985 till 2004 followed by exploration of its impacts on staff and students and then an analysis of the developing discourses among the many players in the higher education sector. The opening sections of this chapter consider what insights can be gained from previous contemporary evaluations of quality assurance, and assess how far quality assurance fulfilled the original aims set for it by government. Combining all these layers of information has then allowed me to compile a balance-sheet of specific impacts of quality assurance, positive and negative.

12.2 Evaluations of quality assurance 1992-2005

An obvious step in this research was to investigate contemporary judgements about quality assurance and the many evaluations and reviews, both internal and external, produced during its first decade have provided a rich source of archival material. These have been mentioned at appropriate points in the chronological narrative.

12.2.1 Evaluation for review and accountability

From the start, as described in chapter 6, the regulating agencies and the universities themselves accepted the need for evaluation, partly as a fundamental element in public accountability and partly to test whether the purposes of quality assurance were being fulfilled. The HEQC and the Funding Councils in England and Scotland published reports on their initial activities and thereafter established a pattern of regular self-review. They also commissioned external reviews as a means of establishing their credibility. While these early reviews identified a number of positive impacts of quality assurance, they also highlighted some tensions which became recurrent themes in the quality debate. The archives of HEFCE record the ongoing cycle of annual reports on the successive rounds of Teaching Quality Assessment between 1993 and 2001 as well as frequent consultations with the sector on proposed changes, in particular the introduction of the numerical scoring system from 1995. HEFCE’s own report on the first phase of quality assurance from 1993-

95 was supplemented by an external report by Brennan, Frederiks and Shah (1997) of the Open University's Quality Support Unit.

On several occasions, major changes in the structure and operation of quality assurance resulted from external reviews, notably the report of the Joint Planning Group (1996), and the proposals of the Dearing Committee (1997) which influenced the future agenda of the new QAA. Ministerial intervention in 2001 was followed by another major review and consultation process which led to the introduction of institutional audit and the QAA's own review (*Learning from Subject Review, 1993-2001*) fed into the 2003 White Paper. Two important external reviews were commissioned by HEFCE from management consultants (PA Consulting, 2000, and JM Consulting, 2005) to investigate the hitherto largely unexplored area of the costs of quality assurance. A further source of external evaluation in the first decade of the 21st century was the growth of European collaboration between the QAA and equivalent European organisations in 'efforts to ensure alignment with quality assurance aspects of the emerging European Higher Education Area' (HEFCE 2003/35: 6).

The extent of review activity explains Sharp's feeling that the quality assurance agencies had been '*evaluated to death*' (I: 4). On the other hand, he entirely accepted the justification for independent evaluation of quality assurance: '*That is a very important thing. I think it should be open to public scrutiny, exactly because of ... the problem of justifying it and saying, "Well is it making a difference?"*' . Furthermore, he emphasised the need for rigorous external evaluation to avoid bias.

12.2.2 *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

It was sometimes argued that the evaluation by quality assurance agencies of their own work was not sufficiently rigorous or objective or contained an element of positive 'spin'. Writing in *The Independent* of 27 August, 1998, Alderman called for greater scrutiny of 'the extent to which the QAA [was] itself quality assured', while Brown (2004: 165) drew attention to the need for 'quality control of external quality assurance' to assess whether it was itself achieving 'an adequate standard of quality'.

A number of interviewees were concerned that a greater degree of objectivity was required. Interviewee 10 felt that, apart from the CHES review (1994) which he commended for its independence, '*the evaluations have tended to be conducted by and on behalf of people*

who believed in the existing arrangements' (I: 10) who generally offered fairly anodyne comments. Barnett offered a more significant explanation for the reviewers' failure to identify problems: *'there's a kind of blankness about the whole system. It refuses to reflect on itself, for fear of what might be found, doubtless. It would be found, or certainly would have been found, that the emperor had few clothes'* (I: 8). On the other hand, it would have been surprising if the agencies had not sought to present their work in a favourable light and in fact Harvey (2010 (2): 106) judged that impact of external evaluations on the practice of the agencies themselves had largely been 'beneficial, a means of enhancing both their improvement and accountability'.

12.2.3 Evaluation overkill?

The early years of the 21st century saw a proliferation of mainly government-instigated reviews under such aspirational titles as *Better Accountability for Higher Education* (PA Consulting, 2000) and *Higher Education: Easing the Burden* (Better Regulation Task Force, 2002). These were more about process than content, and often added to the complexity of the structures they had been trying to simplify by setting up new bodies and/or proposing yet more reviews. Regular oversight was continued by a Quality Assurance Framework Review Group convened by HEFCE, SCOP and Universities UK in August 2004. This was evidence, if any was needed, of the relentless and self-perpetuating operation of the evaluation machine which often ironically had the effect of increasing bureaucracy rather than reducing it, calling to mind the maxim that

'Big fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite them,
And little fleas have lesser fleas, and so *ad infinitum*'
(*Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, 2008).

Thus, quality assurance in higher education was undoubtedly subjected to a high degree of evaluation. The function was taken seriously by both the public agencies and the universities themselves in fulfilment of their public accountability. However, there were justified criticisms of these layers of evaluation which often failed to challenge the principles of quality assurance. Public accountability notwithstanding, it is easy to understand the negative reactions of academic staff to this constant focus on evaluation which, as they saw it, added another costly and time-consuming layer to the burden of quality assurance without delivering any obvious benefit to teaching and learning. To a researcher looking back from a distance, there is a striking gulf between the favourable

evaluations appreciating the value of quality assurance and the simultaneous negative reactions of many academics involved in operating the systems.

12.3 *Changing aims of quality assurance*

12.3.1 The ‘purposes’ of quality assurance

In view of the political origins of quality assurance, it is logical to evaluate its impacts since its implementation via the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 in terms of the stated aims set out for it by the government. The following table collates the core purposes of quality assurance expressed in legislation and guidance over the period of this study. Interestingly, the UK purposes corresponded closely with a list compiled from an international study of 12 quality agencies (Brennan and Shah, 2000: 31-32).

Table 12:1 The purposes of quality assurance defined in legislation, 1992-2004

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure that all publicly-funded higher education is of approved quality • To encourage swift action to rectify shortcomings • To encourage improvements in the quality of higher education • To publish information to inform choice and to achieve public accountability • To secure value for money from investment in higher education • To inform funding and reward excellence in learning and teaching. |
|---|

The original ‘purposes’ were revised a number of times in keeping with changing government priorities and contemporary rhetoric. This vacillation was symptomatic of underlying confusion about the purposes and operation of quality assurance and contributed to the turbulence in the system which has been a key theme of this thesis.¹⁷ Notably, one of Dearing’s overarching recommendations was that in future the government should adopt greater stability in the quality assurance arrangements for the benefit of the sector (NCIHE, 1997).

¹⁷ These ‘purposes’ referred specifically to quality assessment, for which HEFCE had a statutory responsibility. The HEQC’s primary mission for quality audit from 1992-97 remained ‘to contribute to the maintenance and improvement of quality at all levels’ (*Guidelines on Quality Assurance*, HEQC, 1994: iii).

12.3.2 Assurance of quality

Acceptance of the case made in this thesis that the government's overarching purpose in introducing quality assurance was to control and regulate higher education leads to the conclusion that this aim was achieved. There is no doubt that the Funding Councils and the HEQC put in place regulatory systems to assess and audit quality. By 1993, the new agencies were established, quality assurance structures set up, assessors and auditors recruited and trained, measurement and reporting systems devised and being operated by administrative staff. The publication of assessment and audit reports was providing evidence of the generally high quality of UK higher education and the robustness of the quality assurance systems. By any standards these were remarkable achievements. Just as notably, the universities and their staff, however reluctantly, were complying with the systems and co-operating to produce the evidence on which quality could be assessed. Despite the policy shifts and inconsistent methods and although universities' protests against the level of external regulation occasionally became strident enough to provoke major change, the overall régime of quality assurance has maintained its regulatory role with co-operation of the sector for over 20 years.

The published 'results' of quality assessments from 1992 onwards through several changes of methodology undoubtedly conveyed a message of 'assurance' to the public that the levels of quality achieved and maintained by the UK universities were extremely high. As mentioned in chapter 3, Brown (2004) summarised data provided to him personally by Roger Cook of Napier University in 2002, which revealed that in phase 1 (1992-95) only 1.29% of institutions were rated 'unsatisfactory' while in the second cycle of the TQA (1995-2001) after the introduction of numerical scoring, average scores in subject assessments had risen and 'out of the 3,311 assessments, there were only 35 published fails' (Brown, 2004: 97). Though there were some criticisms of inconsistency in the scoring and of academics who learnt to 'play the game', these figures presented consistent evidence of the high quality of UK higher education sufficient to reassure the public and boost its reputation abroad as well as providing a defence against potential complaints and litigation. From this point of view, quality assurance was fulfilling its primary purpose.

12.3.3 'Rectification of shortcomings'

One fundamental test of the effectiveness of quality assurance was whether or not action was taken in response to critical assessments or audits. Interviewees for this study who

were professionally involved in quality assurance were confident that in the rare cases where the required threshold was not attained, remedial action was taken. Interviewee 1 commented that on the whole the sector was performing very well but action was being taken if necessary (I: 1). From his personal experience Masters believed that *'if something was unsatisfactory...there had to be a process of improvement'* (I: 5). Sharp outlined the rigorous process that ensued from an unsatisfactory rating. *'If you take an extreme case where something has been found to be seriously problematical ...there is a requirement to produce an action plan and implement change and that change is then monitored'*. There would then be a 'year-on' report *'explicitly designed to address the question what have you done as a result of the last quality review?'* followed by a review meeting between the QAA and the university which in Sharp's experience demonstrated that *'the university not only has attended to the sum of the things that were highlighted as being problematical, but they've got way beyond that'* (I: 4). At crisis level, therefore, it appears that this purpose was normally achieved.

However, it has also become apparent that where this level of compulsion was not enforced, responses to recommendations in reports might be more variable. Producing positive action assumed willing participation by the universities which was not always forthcoming, as Interviewee 6 remembered from his time on the governing body of a university: *'What I wanted was action plans from each department or faculty or even subject group'* (I: 6) but this expectation that action would follow apparently came as a surprise to academics. Other instances were reported of assessment reports sometimes being consigned to filing cabinets without follow-up, thus negating the value of the whole exercise. Underwood (2000) reported that the use made of reports was very variable and there was little sharing of good practice or institution-wide action. The finding in a review by Brennan *et al.* (1997) that 66% of reports gave rise to action left room for the less reassuring conclusion that the remaining third did not.

12.3.4 Quality assurance for improvement

The impacts of external quality assurance in stimulating improvements were hard to assess, partly because the number of variable factors involved made it impossible to attribute causality and partly because of the lack of available data. However, there was statistical evidence of rising grades from 1992 to 1995 (Cook, cited by Brown, 2004: 76) and scores from 1995-2001 (Cook, cited by Brown, 2004: 92-94) while evaluations of quality assurance, both internal and external, regularly mentioned improvements. The tangible

benefits to teaching are discussed in section 12.4.2 below. Thus it was clear that both audit and assessment reports had the potential to stimulate improvements if staff co-operation could be gained. Many academics benefited from participating in activities related to quality assurance or took advantage of new staff development opportunities. On the other hand, others were put off by the externally imposed processes which rarely succeeded in drawing them into ‘a level of positive engagement with the system’ (Newton, 1999: 31).

The discourse between accountability and improvement analysed in chapter 12 revealed that the potential for improvement through quality assurance was often limited by the government’s emphasis on regulation, particularly after the demise of the HEQC. The 2003 White Paper continued to express the government’s commitment to ‘support improvements in teaching quality in all institutions’ (DfES, 2003, p. 46). However, the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group (HEFCE, 2005/35: 7), though reporting high performance by the sector, added that ‘the group would now wish to see a move towards a more enhancement focused process’. Practical commitment to improvement seemed to be a long time coming.

12.3.5 Information for public accountability and student choice

The responsibility to provide ‘effective and accessible public information’ as part of accountability was added to the list of the purposes of quality assessment in the HEFCE Circular 39/94: 23. The quality assurance agencies complied with the demands of public accountability by publishing their assessment and audit reports and frequent internal and external evaluations of their activities.

The long-held mantra that ‘student choice will increasingly work to drive up quality, supported by much better information’ continued to be emphasised by the government in the 2003 White Paper (DfES, 2003: p 46) and led to the requirement for a greatly increased supply of information intended to guide choices. As described in chapter 10, the validity of this claim was challenged and the practice of putting the onus of such important choices on to students who would not have the maturity to judge was strongly criticised. More recently, compliance with the requirement to produce the large volumes of information specified by the Cooke Committee has itself become the subject of audit, leading some academics to complain that the primary focus is now on the quality of the information

rather than on the quality of the education they are providing. Overall, it is not clear that information intended to guide students in their choices has always achieved this aim.

12.3.6 Links between quality and funding

12.3.6.1 Value for money

Quality assurance was intended to be used as an instrument to achieve the government's frequently stated expectation that universities would achieve 'the maintenance and enhancement of *cost-effective* teaching, scholarship and research of high quality' (HEFCE M2/94: 3.4). The striking paradox between the government's preoccupation with value for money and the apparent lack of concern about the costs of quality assurance itself was mentioned in the previous chapter. The failure to evaluate quality assurance from a value for money point of view was an unjustified anomaly in the prevailing audit culture and understandably provided additional fuel for academics' protests against it. In terms of the expenditure on quality assurance set against the benefits delivered, it did not represent value for money: this aim was not achieved.

12.3.6.2 Assessment to 'inform funding and reward excellence'

Though the potential to offer financial incentives for high achievement in the TQA had been abandoned, the threat to withdraw funding from sub-standard courses remained for several years despite the fact that 'throughout the 8 years in which the TQA exercise had been in existence, the English Funding Council [had] avoided linking the results directly to funding' (Underwood, 2000: 78). Thus, though initially both a financial reward and a penalty had been envisaged as part of establishing links between quality assessment and funding, in the end neither had been implemented. The 'carrot' had been abandoned and the 'stick' had been retained, but only in the rhetoric. In failing to pursue the aim for quality assessment to 'inform funding and to reward excellence' the government appeared to lack the courage of its convictions to use quality assurance as a financial instrument to promote value for money.

12.3.6.3 Unreasonable expectations?

A recurring theme in this study has been the difficulty caused for universities by constant government pressure to deliver high quality education to more students with inadequate funding. In this respect, there was a link between funding and quality but not in the way

intended. Paradoxically, the government maintained these high expectations but refused to acknowledge the converse – that less money would lead to lower quality. In 1997, the need to increase funding for higher education had been a strong point in Dearing's argument in favour of student fees, which emphasised the fact that the current low levels of university pay were a threat to the quality of teaching. As noted in chapter 8, this situation was finally acknowledged by the budget increase in the Higher Education Act of 2004 but even this initiative was felt by many academics to be too little and too late, particularly as it did nothing to improve their basic salary levels.

12.3.6.4 Tuition fees

The introduction of tuition fees from 2000 engendered a different link between finance and quality in the government's mind: 'in an era when students are being asked to contribute more to the costs of their tuition, to reflect the benefits it brings them, their expectations of teaching quality will rise' (DfES, 2003: 4: 4.1). Greater emphasis on student rights to expect high quality teaching, even to the extent of offering undeliverable government guarantees, increased the pressure on universities to have in place 'effective quality assurance systems and robust degree standards' (DfES, 2003: 4.13). Though all students did not subscribe to this view, this was an added challenge to universities, and to many people it seemed perfectly justified.

12.4 *Impacts of quality assurance: the balance sheet*

This section moves to consider the specific impacts of quality assurance on universities, on the teaching they delivered, and on their staff and students. In attempting to compile a balance sheet of positives and negatives, it is important to re-emphasise two overarching contextual factors. Firstly, impacts took time to become apparent, and could have greater or lesser effect during the successive phases of quality assurance. Secondly, the multiple reactions of groups and individuals within the higher education sector depended on how quality assurance was implemented in their own environment and how they were professionally and personally affected.

12.4.1 What did quality assurance do for universities?

On the credit side, the introduction of quality audit and assessment systems meant that the universities had to take a much more systematic approach to the planning, delivery and

evaluation of the education they were providing – a not unreasonable demand of a publicly funded service. Used constructively, quality assurance became a management tool which could promote beneficial change and thus helped particularly the pre-92 universities to adapt to the new régime. Over time, all universities developed their own internal quality evaluation systems in the form of annual course monitoring and periodic reviews which mirrored external quality audit and assessment procedures.

Interviewee 6 (when principal of a university) recognised that quality assurance had the potential to change culture: *'I was ... keen to make sure we got a good assessment but also one that embodied the notion of continuous improvement'* (I: 6). While this was not a universal view, he believed that the process of external review, if received positively, could have the effect of reducing defensiveness among staff and increasing confidence in their own programmes.

Publication of audit and assessment reports fulfilled public accountability as well as enhancing the reputations of universities which scored well. From his own experience Interviewee 2 pointed out that the international spread of quality assurance was also providing evidence to bolster the UK's reputation. Barnett recognised the importance of international league tables as a by-product of quality assurance: *'we need to acknowledge what the evaluation system demonstrated publicly...that the UK higher education system is of high quality'* (I: 8). With the rise of the consumer ethos in higher education, effective quality assurance systems could give universities evidence to counter the growth of complaints about the quality of their provision (Underwood, 2000).

Quality assurance could also encourage the spread of good practice, particularly during the time of the HEQC whose major focus was on improvement. The experience of personal participation in quality assurance processes by large numbers of trained and experienced peer reviewers, both externally and in their own institutions, was frequently cited as one of its major benefits. Kelly mentioned the positive effects of assessment or audit visits, *'sharing good practice, getting new ideas, personal and professional experience'*. He had detected *'a camaraderie in the subject and a willingness to exchange'* and judged that *'part of quality assessment which nobody had foreseen was actually getting into the guts of the teaching of a department in another university'* (I: 3). From personal experience, Sharp emphasised that the value of this kind of exchange was *'to learn from practice and to get practising academics engaged in these kind of discussions and from these discussions to try and codify exemplars of what we mean by good practice in teaching and learning in*

different contexts' (I: 4). From another angle, Interviewee 2 stressed the importance of external dialogue with other university departments and praised what he described as the '*robust but collaborative*' relationship with the QAA (I: 2). There were internal benefits too: the exercise of preparing self-assessment documents by departments or subject groups encouraged reflective practice as a collective activity among academics. The process of implementing recommendations from reports was also important. Interviewee 1 gave a good deal of credit to the universities' internal quality assurance units: '*they're helping people all the time, you know, they're checking on this, they're giving examples of best practice*' which were then disseminated across the institution (I: 1).

While recognising these benefits for universities, however, it is also important to note the undeniable negatives which have loomed large in this narrative: the major loss of autonomy resulting from increased state control; a prolonged period of strife with government agencies; the emphasis on accountability rather than improvement; scoring methods encouraging a culture of competition alien to academic values; the huge increase in administrative workload and the costs of the whole exercise.

12.4.2 What did quality assurance do for teaching?

2.4.2.1 The profile of teaching

Some academics viewed quality assessment of teaching as a potential means of redressing the balance with the RAE (Kogan and Hanney, 2000). By the end of the 1990s, Brennan and Shah (2000) reported that much more attention was being given to the teaching function, while Underwood (2000: 81) believed that quality assessment had '*provided an impetus for institutions to give more attention to the quality of their teaching*'. Barnett remained cautious about attributing this change entirely to quality assurance: '*one can't simply read off directly an improvement in the profile of teaching from the presence and the work of the quality assurance industry*' (I: 8). However, several interviewees commented that this had been one of the major beneficial impacts of quality assurance. '*There was a recognition that teaching itself was a really very important process*' (I: 1). Interviewee 2 agreed that quality assurance did shift the balance between research and teaching, though this took time. Indeed he wondered '*where teaching would have been if the RAE had come in and there hadn't been any QA*' (I: 2). From a SHEFC point of view, Masters was confident that '*the quality assessment of teaching ... started to move the needle a little bit towards the status of teaching compared to the status of research*' (I: 5).

However, by the end of the 1990s, researchers were noting that the impact of quality assurance on the status of teaching remained variable. Henkel (2000: 95) had no doubt that the TQA had led to ‘the greater valuing of teaching and learning at the top of institutions’ but on the other hand, it was clear that at departmental level progress was slow. As long as success in the RAE brought financial rewards and teaching quality assessment did not, ‘institutions would do nothing to redress the balance of reward in the academic community between teaching and research and individuals would behave accordingly’ (Henkel, 2000). Morley (2003) believed that the added pressures of quality assessment had a greater impact on academics at departmental level than any change in the status of teaching *vis-à-vis* research. An article by Drennan sub-titled ‘Nobody gets famous for their teaching’ (2001) comparing the impacts of quality assessment on teaching and on research confirmed this conclusion. Her research had shown that although the TQA had raised the profile of teaching and learning within universities, it had *not* raised the ‘esteem, or value, of teaching as compared to research’ which remained the main accelerator of career advancement (Drennan, 2001: 174).

It thus appears that the enhanced status of teaching was not universal and might depend on the attitudes of individual vice-chancellors or heads of department. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, research continued to be regarded in many places as ‘the activity of greater prestige’ and carried more weight in decisions about promotion (Biggs, 2003: 280). This battle was hard to win. Nevertheless, it was still widely believed that one of the most significant impacts of quality assurance was to raise the status of teaching in universities and at least offer a challenge to the primacy of research.

12.4.2.2 Career opportunities in teaching

The requirement for every university to have a learning and teaching strategy was accompanied in most universities by the creation of a senior post of pro-vice-chancellor or vice-principal with responsibility for Learning and Teaching, including the oversight of teaching quality. Though some interviewees commented that these were not necessarily the most influential positions among the senior management (I: 2; I: 4) they were nevertheless symbolic of the higher recognition being accorded to teaching within the university hierarchy.

In some universities, the increased awareness of teaching led to the growth of research interest in pedagogy itself. Barnett commented on the burgeoning scholarship of teaching and learning over the past few decades, particularly in the United States, which was developing '*a strand in the literature of teaching and learning within the disciplines*' for interested academics (I: 8). On the other hand, the scholarship of teaching was not always regarded as a prestigious topic for research (Biggs, 2003). Barnett also mentioned a continuing problem that pedagogical research has not yet found '*a proper place within the RAE... so it's not yet in either an individual's interest or in a university's interest to encourage it hugely*' (I: 8).

One other notable development mentioned by Interviewee 1 was that some universities introduced '*what were essentially teaching only appointments*' for staff whose major interest was in teaching rather than research. The criteria required them to show evidence that they were '*engaged in scholarship*' to the extent that, though they might not be generating '*new knowledge*', they were conversant with the literature of a subject and had kept themselves up-to-date. In some cases, promotions recognised distinction in teaching '*which would never have happened if the balance between teaching and research hadn't shifted*' (I: 1). Some interviewees welcomed these developments as justified acknowledgements of the enhanced status of teaching but others expressed reservations. Blackstone, however, felt that an academic research background was essential: it was wrong for an academic to become a professor '*unless he or she had something to profess*' (I: 7).

12.4.2.3 Practical impacts on teaching

When asked to identify practical impacts of quality assurance on teaching, interviewees gave a range of answers. Many of these related to course planning and approval and the information given to students which was '*enormously better than it used to be*' (I: 2), especially for the pre-92 universities. The course documentation was often expressed in terms of intended learning outcomes which Interviewee 1 saw as a very positive change attributable directly to the introduction of quality assessment: '*outcome-based learning wouldn't have come without quality assessment – the fact that you are required to produce a syllabus which not only says what you're going to teach, but what you expect the students to learn*' (I: 1). A further benefit was the routine provision of course handbooks for students, and, later, the placing of extensive course materials on designated websites, often including podcasts of lectures. Interviewee 2 emphasised that there had also been

‘enormous improvements in assessment techniques’ (I: 2) accompanied by stated time limits for the return of assessed work. A response to the wider diversity of student intake was a greater emphasis on student support, including the appointment of institutional or departmental learning support officers to assist students who might require it. Summing up the practical impacts of quality assurance on teaching, Barnett reflected that *‘the main moves were towards making teaching processes and their attendant monitoring and evaluation systems which had built up within institutions much more explicit’* (I: 8). Similar developments were identified in evaluations of quality assurance and confirmed by contemporary commentators (Harvey, 1995 and 1997, Henkel, 2000, Brown, 2004). The cumulative view from these widespread sources leads to the conclusion that quality assurance had produced significant improvements in the organisation and processes of teaching.

12.4.2.4 Negative opinions

However, as many contributions to the quality debate indicated, these favourable opinions were by no means universal. Pollitt (1995: 142) commented that academics had been coerced into ‘cutting per student class contact times, teaching much larger classes, reducing the number or length of written assignments, sacrificing time for research and scholarship and so on’. Difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of student learning meant that many assessments of teaching quality took account of quantitative factors which many academics felt were divorced from the essence of teaching. Power (1999: 103) identified the risk of audit ‘transforming teaching from a relationship into a transaction which can be made auditable in isolation’.

Nevertheless it is fair to say that within a decade there was a widespread view that the status of teaching had been raised and the organisation improved, with corresponding gains for students and a growth in pedagogical research. Though research rather than teaching remained the main criterion for promotion to the highest levels, there was some expansion of teaching roles and of senior strategic posts with responsibility for the oversight of teaching quality.

12.4.2.5 Quality assurance was not wholly about teaching

My starting point for this study was the assumption that in the early 1990s the principal aim of quality assurance was to improve teaching. One surprising insight emerging clearly

from my research was that though this was an honourable goal, translated into political rhetoric from 1985 onwards, quality assurance as implemented was not essentially about *teaching*.

When first introduced, the systems already seemed to academics like a largely bureaucratic exercise and it was not clear what effect they would have on teaching and learning. Judgements about quality were made on the basis of statistical performance indicators such as graduation and non-completion rates, degree classifications and graduate employment figures, as well as organisational factors like course planning and evaluation, information available to students and the facilities provided to support learning. Though these could contribute to more efficient organisation and thence to the overall quality of the student experience, they did not focus on the interaction between teacher and student and how this could improve learning.

Comparing the impacts of external assessment on research and on teaching, Drennan (2001: 177) highlighted difficulties in making judgements about teaching because of the lack of agreed performance indicators and the common view that to change this would require ‘a definition of “excellence” in teaching and some mechanisms to record and evaluate teaching performance and innovative developments.’ In fact Harrison and Lockwood (2001) argued that ‘the QAA does not aim to enhance teaching quality. The QAA aims to enhance *confidence* in teaching quality, not teaching quality itself’. Some interviewees indicated a view that that quality assurance was more about improving the management and organisation of courses than about the transaction of teaching.

2.4.2.6 Quality assurance could undermine teaching quality

Earlier chapters have highlighted paradoxical situations in which quality assurance measures themselves actually hindered improvements in quality. The government’s prioritisation of accountability as the primary aim of quality assurance compelled academics to devote time and effort to compliance with regulatory mechanisms which inevitably diverted them from their core activities of teaching and research.

There was a strong feeling that the often mechanistic methods were unfitted for the assessment of teaching and learning. Content was submerged by process and the system nominally directed towards improvement actually prevented academics from improving their teaching. Barnett had always opposed the TQA’s numerical scoring system on the

grounds that it was ‘*both insufficiently sensitive and punitive*’ (I: 8), while Morley (2003: viii) highlighted the irony of this: when quality assurance claimed to be concerned with the ‘fitness for purpose’ of higher education, how fit for academic purposes were the alien ‘quality technologies’ employed in its own processes?

The dominant regulatory ethos of audit and assessment could inhibit creativity in teaching, rewarding departments ‘that were good at delivering a tried and tested product at the expense of those that were innovating to develop a better one’ (Brown, 2004: 165). In addition, as noted in Chapter 10, while some aspects of the empowerment of students as an aspect of quality assurance might be welcomed, there were risks that efforts to satisfy their interests as ‘customers’ could undermine pedagogy and reduce standards. Gibbs cited research evidence that requirements of quality assurance could also have an unintended effect on student behaviour. For example, the very detailed course specifications of ILOs complying with QAA codes of practice may encourage students to narrow the focus of their learning and ignore topics not subject to assessment (Gibbs, 2010, 25). In fact the overarching message of his book *Dimensions of Quality* (2010) was that many of the performance indicators used to assess quality gave little information about the quality of teaching.

Kinman and Jones (2003: 31) claimed that at the practice level, ‘the greatest irony of the past ten years is that the continuous imposition of various ‘quality controls’ has actually diminished the pedagogy and knowledge quality for higher education’.

12.4.3 What did quality assurance do for staff?

12.4.3.1 Staff development and training

The rise in the status of teaching resulted in a greater focus on academic staff training and professional development described by Interviewee 1 as ‘*long overdue*’ (I: 1). Quality assurance itself contributed to this: indeed, the training of subject specialist reviewers and review chairs to undertake quality assessment visits between 1993 and 2001 was described as ‘the largest single staff development exercise in UK higher education’ (QAA, 2003: 4). Specialist training was also needed for the army of administrators employed to manage the technical processes of audit and assessment and liaise with the QAA and the Funding Councils. Henkel (2000:105) recalled the previous rarity of ‘permanent department-initiated structures for professional development or quality improvement’ but with the

arrival of quality assessment more formalised approaches to staff development were introduced, often based in new Teaching and Learning Centres, partly because ‘they were seen to reap rewards in external assessments’. Interviewee 1 believed that the most important change introduced under the banner of quality assurance was that *‘the processes of induction of new teaching staff and the mentoring of young teaching staff became ubiquitous and it ... was on the whole done pretty well and pretty unthreateningly’* (I: 1). He felt that though these programmes took time to become accepted everywhere, they had eventually become *‘almost part of the wallpaper,’* and over time, quality assurance had become less threatening: *‘it’s moved away from policing to saying “Look, this is important to you”’* (I: 1). Research by Nasr *et al.* (1996) cited by Gibbs (2010) found that teachers with teaching qualifications such as a PGCE were more highly rated by their students than those without. The foundation of the ILTHE succeeded by the Higher Education Academy indicated high level commitment to this aim and HEFCE reported in 2006 on the publication of a framework for professional teaching standards to offer accredited courses to new staff which had been a Key Performance Target of the Higher Education Academy (HEFCE *Annual Report*, 2005-06).

On the other hand, the picture was not always so rosy. Barnett pointed out that the *‘role and status and position’* enjoyed by the Teaching and Learning Centres was very variable (I: 8). There could be friction between them and Quality Assurance offices if they embarked on ‘competing improvement agendas based on often opposing values’, (Harvey and Williams (2010 (2): 85). Sharp explained that initially, these centres were often *‘sidelined, indeed even physically they were often in an outpost miles away from anyone else. In most cases they stopped doing any teaching themselves so they stopped having any impact by demonstration. Up until recently it was only the enthusiastic that would go to any short courses that they were running’* (I: 4). Despite his personal commitment to the benefits of staff development, Sharp found himself having to admit that until recent years *‘the vast majority of academics’* would have rated the benefit they had received from such centres at *‘very close to zero’*. The units *‘were paddling their own canoes, doing quite interesting things, but having no impact at all on practice’* (I: 4).

12.4.3.2 Jobs in quality assurance

As mentioned in chapter 6, some staff undoubtedly benefited from the career opportunities provided by quality assurance in management or administrative roles, sometimes in teaching only appointments or through participation as peer auditors or assessors. Some

even rose to the challenges of performativity within the competitive culture (Ball, 2000). As quality assurance became a centralised function in institutions, many more academics became involved in university committees which enabled them to participate in dialogue at senior level and to develop a university-wide perspective on teaching.

12.4.3.3 Disengagement from quality assurance

In contrast, many academics continued to react negatively to the imposition of quality assessment, particularly when its implementation entailed ‘crossing the boundaries of the classroom and assessing *individual* teacher performance’ (Henkel, 2000: 105). Williams reported considerable resistance to training on the part of academics who ‘*haven’t come in to learn to be teachers*’ (I: 9). A further issue was that attendance at staff development events was often optional for experienced teachers, with the result that the most frequent attendees tended to be those who were already good teachers, while those who stayed away were often those who most needed to attend (Biggs, 2003).

At the same time, resistance to the bureaucratic burden, a constant refrain in this study, became the longest running cause of complaints by academics in the history of quality assurance. For many, the pedantry and rules governing the TQA rendered process more important than content, creating a concept of quality which they saw as separate from the ‘substance of education’ (Henkel, 2000: 99). It diverted them from their core activities of teaching and research, stifling their creativity under the weight of regulation. Masters (I: 5) pointed out that supporters of quality assurance were likely to be involved in the QAA processes professionally or at very senior level in universities and might well have a very different attitude from those at department level. Interviewee 10 also saw this gulf as a problem: ‘*quality assurance has become a technology in its own right... and ordinary academics have not felt engaged in it*’ (I:10).

As the bureaucratic burden persisted and the lack of connection with teaching became more obvious, some academics’ disillusionment with quality assurance increased. However, one of the main points made by Henkel’s research (2000) on the impact of quality assurance on academics was that the long-term resilience of their discipline-based educational values persisted despite their enforced adoption of the new regulatory procedures. This interpretation was echoed by Interviewee 2 who commented that in his experience, at least in the pre-1992 universities, ‘*the initial resistance has never been overcome*’ (I: 2).

12.4.4 What did quality assurance do for students?

12.4.4.1 Benefits

Because of their diverse abilities, backgrounds, personalities and motivations, it is important to recognise that no generalisations can reliably be made about the impact of quality assurance on students. Barnett pointed out that there had certainly been room for improvement in the kind of university education they were being offered before 1992: *‘students in the past were often short-changed, courses were run in a very amateurish way without proper documentation, systems were ill-developed, examination boards were again run in an amateurish way and so on’* (I: 8). Contrasting his contacts with students as chief executive of the QAA with his own experience at university, Williams noted an immense change. *‘The students were central to what was going on; they were given proper clear objectives; they knew what they were supposed to be doing; there was proper support for them’*. He was convinced, therefore, that they had directly benefited from the practical impacts of quality assurance on teaching: *‘in terms of positives, I do actually think that students get a much much better deal as a result of an institution or a department having to be more careful, more organised, less random, less dependent on the whims of individuals’* (I: 9). They undoubtedly benefited from the improvements in teaching and increased support for learning outlined above and from genuine attempts by the universities to enhance the quality of the student experience.

12.4.4.2 Disadvantages

Chapter 10 noted that while many students welcomed increased opportunities to express their views about courses and greater representation in quality assurance processes and governance, others were less interested in becoming involved and even resented the constant demands for their opinions. Some also felt that the information they received from the universities was not useful. The extension of consumer rights to students as paying customers enabled them to seek redress against poor quality, but some rejected this identity and were reluctant to complain. Though increasing attention to the ‘student voice’ was undoubtedly welcome in some respects, many academics felt that empowerment of students as evaluators of quality could threaten valued relationships between students and teachers.

12.4.5 *The balance sheet*

The following table summarises the widely disparate impacts of quality assurance on organisations and individuals in different parts of the higher education system. Clearly the strength of the impacts varied over time from institution to institution and department to department. The differences depended on many factors, including the attitude of the university leadership to quality assurance, the amenability of staff to embracing cultural change, the level of funds available to enhance or undermine the student experience, and, not least, the outcomes of the quality audits and assessments which could have a significant effect on the university's reputation and morale. Setting out the positives and negatives in this way strikingly illustrates the huge complexity of quality assurance, its major impacts on university life and the impossibility of drawing clear-cut conclusions about its effects. Almost every benefit had a corresponding disadvantage.

Table 12.2: Impacts of quality assurance - the balance sheet

	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
The state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gained more control over universities • Regulatory systems to achieve accountability • Scoring systems to measure quality and identify 'shortcomings' • Information to guide students and reassure public • Aim to 'secure value for money' from HE • International reputation of UK HE enhanced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QA caused major conflict with HE sector • Aim for accountability eclipsed improvement • QA recommendations not always implemented • Mantra that 'choice drives up quality' not proven • Link between quality assessments and funding never made
Universities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More systematic approach to organisation of HE • QA as a management tool promoting beneficial changes • Public accountability through publication of reports • High TQA scores could help marketing and recruitment • Potential to spread good practice among departments and universities • Evidence to counter complaints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in university autonomy • Strife with government agencies • Regulatory demands reduced time for improvement • Inappropriate scoring methods • Growth of competition alien to university values • Costs of QA not delivering value for money
Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Status of teaching raised <i>vis-à-vis</i> research • Growth in pedagogical research • Improvement in organisation and documentation • Emphasis on learning outcomes. • Course materials improved • Better assessment of students' work • Improvement of student guidance and support • Internal course monitoring and review systems developed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QA not primarily about interactions of teaching and learning • Lack of criteria and methods to measure teaching • Compliance culture inhibiting creativity in teaching • Variable status of Teaching and Learning Centres • QA undermining quality of teaching
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some career opportunities through involvement in QA • Greater focus on staff training and development • Benefits of participation in external QA reviews • Internal involvement at institutional level and wider perspective on teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intrusion into individual teacher performance • Staff resistance to training • Increased workload • Bureaucratic burden diverting academics from teaching • Managerialism • Lack of incentives • Negative psychological effects
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better organisation and more systematic delivery of education • More information before and during university experience • Greater attention to student views • Emphasis on student 'rights' • Experience of involvement in QA processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information overkill and 'questionnaire fatigue' • Rejecting identity as 'customers' • Staff dumbing down courses to gain popularity • Reduction of trust between students and teachers

Chapter 13: VERDICTS ON QUALITY ASSURANCE

‘Plants don’t flourish when we keep pulling them up to check how their roots are growing. Equally, political, institutional and professional life does not thrive when we constantly uproot them to demonstrate that everything is transparent and trustworthy’.

Onora O’Neill, *A Question of Trust* (Reith Lecture 1, 2002)

13.1 Introduction

My overarching aims in this research were to consider the following questions:

- Why was quality assurance introduced into UK universities during the 1990s?
- How did it operate?
- What were its impacts on the higher education sector?

I first considered why the quality of teaching came to preoccupy the higher education sector from the mid-1980s onwards and how far the introduction of audit and assessment systems were linked with political policies being extended to the whole of the public sector at that time. The chronological narrative covered the implementation and operation of quality assurance between 1992 and 2004 and the profound changes it caused for those working in the system. Later sections traced the many conflicting discourses between key players which had emerged in the course of the study and analysed how far quality assurance achieved the purposes defined for it by government. This allowed me to compile the balance sheet of specific impacts on higher education, both positive and negative, which appears in chapter 12. This final chapter of the thesis offers answers to the research questions, leading to a number of verdicts about quality assurance and what might have been done better to enhance its effects on teaching and learning.

13.2 Barriers to judgement

13.2.1 Questions of causality

In the course of this research I encountered a number of barriers which made it difficult to reach verdicts about quality assurance. Firstly, the frequent changes in the policies and practice of quality assurance during the 20 years covered by the research make it hard to gauge its overall impacts. Secondly, lack of consensus about definitions and measurement of quality was and remains one of the main contributory factors to the long-running quality debate: if quality could not be defined, how could it be measured, particularly in a way

which would fulfil the government's intention to allow meaningful comparisons between institutions? The politically approved principle of diversity of mission in UK universities presented a barrier to comparison because their objectives would, by definition, vary. Thirdly, the starting points of individual students in university education are different and the final outcomes of their studies often long deferred. Equally significantly, whatever the quality of teaching, progress and attainment crucially depend on the level of commitment and participation by the student. It bears repeating that the concept of quality *assurance* in education was and remains theoretically flawed because there can be no guaranteed outcomes.

In seeking to draw conclusions about the overall impacts of quality assurance, therefore, questions about causality arise: as Interviewee 2 observed, changes were not necessarily the results of quality assurance but more a '*slow improvement in the culture*' (I: 2).

Undoubtedly quality assurance produced some demonstrable effects, both positive and negative, but some attributions of cause may be based more on reasonable inference than on 'proof'. Indeed many aspects of the quality of the student experience were attributable to other factors, such as greater diversity of students, changing staff:student ratios and overstretched facilities which inevitably hindered attempts to improve quality.

13.2.2 Multiple perspectives

In keeping with the constructivist paradigm of the thesis, I have gathered information from multiple sources into a composite picture of the history of quality assurance. I have drawn on evidence from official documents, contemporary literature, evaluations of quality assurance at successive stages and information from interviewees with personal experience of the period. In the course of this research I learnt that while this methodology may reveal 'the complex interactions of factors in any situation' (Cresswell, 2007), it may not lead to certainty about cause and effect. Thus, the variation in interests and opinions revealed in the study have made it difficult to reach definitive conclusions about the impacts of quality assurance. Judgement often becomes a question of whose aims have been fulfilled.

Nevertheless, I believe that this investigation of multiple perspectives described by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007: 34) as 'complexity theory' was indispensable to achieving a comprehensive understanding of the highly complex world of higher education during this turbulent period.

Evaluations of quality assurance have frequently revealed a gap between the negative opinions of individual commentators and ‘official’ reports painting a much rosier picture. Within the universities, clashes between centralised institutional policies and departmental interests have become apparent as well as starkly differing reactions among staff at different levels. Some attributed improvements to quality assurance while others perceived it as ‘unstable, unreliable and undesirable’ (Morley, 2003: 10). Over time much of the most strident opposition diminished as the bureaucratic burden reduced, some practical improvements were demonstrated and external assessment of quality was accepted as the norm by new staff. At the same time, however, the negative effects of the compliance culture on many academics resulted in continuing controversy.

Taking into account these caveats, I now present an assessment of the strange phenomenon of quality assurance that invaded and radically altered higher education.

13.3 *Origins of quality assurance*

Chapters 4 and 5 gave clear answers to the question of why concerns about the quality of UK higher education had arisen during the 1980s. Educationally, the challenge of delivering programmes to a greatly increased number of students of diverse educational background and ability inevitably called for some scrutiny of quality to maintain standards as higher education moved from an élite to a mass system. Politically, the Thatcher government’s desire to make the universities more accountable for both the quality of education they were delivering and the expenditure of public money was in keeping with the New Public Management approach being imposed throughout the public sector. It was a short step to extend the audit approach to the enlarged higher education sector: quality assurance was introduced as an instrument of regulation. Some kind of regulatory measures were justified to impose order on the reformed sector and this also matched an international trend towards regulation of public services. Interviewee 2 was convinced that the introduction of quality assurance was inevitable: *‘it has not got the government off our back but it would have been inconceivable not to have done it’* (I: 2).

The origins of quality assurance were thus explained but a further question emerged among commentators on the sector. In time, Barnett and others realised that the quality evaluation systems put in place in 1992 had in fact only demonstrated what was already known: *‘90% of its evaluations over ten or more years kept showing that the programmes were of high*

quality, the number of courses that were failed or came close to failure you could count on two hands' (I. 8). Why, therefore, was there a continuing need for quality assurance? As Paul Ramsden, later the founding chief executive of the Higher Education Academy, wryly stated: 'we seem to be unable to come to terms with our own general level of excellence' (*THES*, 25 September 1998).

There were a number of possible answers to this question. Firstly, the political desire for regulation did not diminish and successive governments continued to rely on the audit/assessment approach to demonstrate the accountability of higher education. Secondly, quality assurance undeniably achieved some organisational and educational benefits. Its systems were embedded in university management systems and supported by a wide range of vested interests in both universities and public agencies. Quality league tables became an essential marketing tool for universities to attract students in the UK and in the global market. The quality assurance bandwagon continued to roll.

13.4 The operation of quality assurance

This thesis has shown that the new quality agencies and the higher education sector implemented quality assurance systems on a national scale with speed and efficiency. The audit and assessment systems were embedded within the universities and academics were involved in peer review processes. Action was taken to 'rectify' the very small number of failing courses and there was potential to spread good practice through the sharing of reports. More systematic planning and evaluation of courses produced tangible improvements while increased information to students and more emphasis on their views and rights promoted a more student-centred approach. For staff who were motivated, involvement in quality assurance offered some career opportunities and emphasis on professional development helped to raise the status of teaching.

However, the quality assurance process was by no means trouble-free. In their daily lives, academics resented the dominance of regulation at the expense of improvement and the competitive culture of the higher education market in which self-assessment of the universities' activities became confused with the aim of self-promotion. Pressure to comply with time-consuming bureaucratic demands, inappropriate performance indicators and extra costs caused long-running conflicts. It was difficult to be motivated by a system whose highest objective was to achieve a judgement of 'broad confidence'. For many,

quality assurance became an unwelcome symbol of government control which was undermining their autonomy, academic values and professionalism. In short they had become part of a world to which they felt they no longer belonged. In addition, the instability in government priorities, agency structures, scoring systems and vocabulary of quality assurance inevitably undermined confidence in the whole system among many who were obliged to implement it. As Parry (2002: 4) observed with justification, ‘the frequency with which external quality assurance arrangements have been changed... during the last ten years must give rise to questions about their overall purpose and effectiveness’.

13.5 Impacts of quality assurance

13.5.1 Overview

The balance sheet in chapter 12 shows that between 1992 and 2004 many of the stated aims of quality assurance were at least partly fulfilled. The government could be satisfied that the UK now had a functioning regulatory system to measure quality and demonstrate public accountability in the very diverse higher education sector. The state had acquired a considerable amount of control over the universities and the reputation of UK higher education continued high. On the other hand, though the government could claim success for quality assurance when measured against its own stated aims, this research has produced a wealth of evidence that there were also serious downsides.

13.5.2 Quality assurance as a divisive force

Quality assurance proved divisive in several respects. Its imposition as a means of regulating the higher education sector caused a serious rift between the government and the universities. It was a lasting reminder for both universities and individual academics of the increase of government power and their corresponding loss of autonomy, especially when long-term restrictions in government funding threatened improvements in quality. At the same time, compliance with the regulatory demands of quality assurance diverted academics from the aim of improvement to which they would have devoted themselves with more enthusiasm. Quality assurance was also part of the centralising trend which caused friction between academics and managers, while the consumerist perception of

students and teachers as customers and providers could distort the relationship between them.

13.5.3 The 'results' of quality assurance

While on the face of it systems were in place to measure the quality of education, many people had little confidence in the chosen methods and indicators and there was little evidence that quality of teaching had significantly improved. Though the numbers of 'failures' through all the phases of quality assurance were minute (see Table 3:10) there was ongoing doubt that the 'results' demonstrated by quality assurance were certain enough to deliver the intended assurances.

13.5.4 Costs of quality assurance - has it all been worth it?

Earlier chapters have reported on the long-term reluctance to identify the costs of quality assurance which made it impossible to demonstrate that the high levels of effort, time and cost represented value for money – an extraordinary failure of accountability in the prevailing audit culture of the time. While quality assurance had produced some improvements, an increasing tide of opinion from Dearing (1997) onwards challenged the justification for it in terms of value for money. PA Consulting (2000: 7) concluded that the current régime represented 'poor value for money both for stakeholders and for institutions'. In a more systematic cost analysis, J M Consulting (2005, iii) identified some recent cost reductions but also acknowledged that the total annual cost for England of £40 million (including cost of 'professional QA' but not including 'unknown opportunity costs' for staff time) was equivalent to 'four full-time senior staff (professors or senior administrators) at each of the 130 English universities and colleges'. Interviewee 10 who in the early years had not deemed the costs of quality audit and assessment '*unduly expensive*', had later come to the conclusion that the increasing effort devoted to providing information for students rather than focusing on teaching and learning had become '*an almost total waste of public money*' (I: 10). When expressed in such terms, the expenditure on quality assurance did not represent value for money and appeared a sacrifice which the sector could ill afford to make.

A fundamental issue was whether the effort and costs of quality assurance were justified at all. The consistently high position of UK universities in international league tables

indicated that there was little reason for concern about the quality of higher education and in this context, the time and cost expended on quality assurance have been one of the major enigmas of my study. Early criticisms of the enormous effort expended on quality assurance in contrast to little gain had continued. Underwood (2000: 79) queried the justification for expenditure 'of HEFCE's money and of the institutions' time' to identify a very small number of cases of seriously unsatisfactory provision where there were 'major shortcomings'. External evaluations of quality assurance highlighted the same paradox: how could such a demonstrably low risk to the tax payer justify this level of effort and expenditure? (PA Consulting, 2000, the Better Regulation Task Force, 2002).

On these grounds, and especially in view of the resistance it evoked, it is hard to argue that the effort, time and cost invested in the quality assurance exercise were worthwhile.

13.6 Verdicts on quality assurance

13.6.1 Swings and roundabouts

This study has revealed that there is no definitive answer to the question of whether the benefits of quality assurance have outweighed the negatives or vice versa. On the basis of a 'balance sheet' compiled from multiple views, it is not possible to decide with certainty that the overall effect of quality assurance was positive or negative: the answer to this question varied for different individuals according to their personal aims and interests and the prevailing culture in their institutions. Power (1999: 102) pointed out the gap between accounts of staff 'covering up falling standards' caused by greater student numbers, increasing workload and diminishing resources and 'the public success story' of improving quality told in reports published by HEFCE and the QAA. Sharp emphasised the difficulty of judging the difference it made to teaching: *'The problem in answering the question is we don't know... With teaching it is more difficult because we don't have any objective measures so you're driven back to much more subjective approaches'* (I: 4).

Morley (2003: 170) powerfully summed up these diametrically opposed attitudes displayed by staff. 'For some, quality assurance has provided new paradigms for thinking about academic work and new career opportunities. For others, it is about suspicion, mistrust and the management of processes, rather than standards, with considerable wastage and frustration involved.' Having observed the negative reactions within the universities,

Shattock (2012: 206) commented that the various quality régimes imposed on higher education can be regarded as the greatest single unwelcome intrusion into academic life that has occurred since the 1980s. It is interesting then to consider the verdict on the regulation of universities, of which quality assurance was a prime instrument, from one of its major instigators, Margaret Thatcher herself in the first volume of her memoirs, *The Downing Street Years* (1993). She was still confident that greater control over universities (particularly financial) had produced benefits: greater administrative efficiency, closer links with business, more discriminating fee-paying students and greater attention to teaching on the part of academics. However, she admitted to uncharacteristic uncertainty about her dismissal of the many critics who were ‘genuinely concerned about the future autonomy and academic integrity of universities’:

‘I had to concede that these critics had a stronger case than I would have liked. It makes me concerned that many distinguished academics thought that Thatcherism in education meant a philistine subordination of scholarship to the immediate requirements of vocational training. That was certainly no part of my kind of Thatcherism’ (Thatcher, 1993: 598-99).

It seems that even the Iron Lady was taken back by the strength of the negative response.

Commentators whose views punctuate the narrative expressed a gamut of opinions, rarely unreservedly positive and some largely negative. Having followed the history of quality assurance closely through the pages of *Quality in Higher Education* since 1995, Harvey (2010) found little evidence that it made a significant difference to the quality of teaching and learning or the student experience. Reflecting on her major research project, Henkel (2000: 99) stated that ‘the most frequently heard comment from universities of all kinds was that the time and effort it required were at best disproportionate to any gains accruing from it’ and Morley (2003: 62) identified the dominant theme of her study as ‘too much effort for too little gain’. Commenting on quality assurance in general, Brown (2004: 171) went so far as to say he had looked in vain for evidence of ‘any correlation between effectiveness of quality assurance arrangements – external or internal – and actual quality, howsoever defined’.

Interviewees for this study had varying views depending on their own positions and the particular aspect under discussion. As would be expected, the most uniformly positive had been personally involved in the administration of quality assurance in different capacities (Interviewees 1, 4, 5 and 6). Sharp was prepared to commit himself to a positive conclusion: *‘I do feel comfortable that if you do tot up the various benefits that are*

tangible... then I do think you could come out to a reasonable account as it were' (I: 4).

On the other hand, others equally familiar with the system expressed a surprising uncertainty about its value (Interviewees 8, 9, and 10). There was also evidence of pragmatism: Interviewee 2 accepted that quality assurance was inescapable so he might as well make the best of it; Interviewee 3 felt that some potential benefits could have been achieved but the implementation was flawed, and Interviewee 7 criticised the unreasonable expectation of improvement in a context of chronic underfunding.

13.6.2 'A sledge-hammer to crack a nut'?

Though the universities had largely accepted the principle of quality assurance in the interests of accountability, front-line academics associated it with 'a complex of policies that meant dwindling resources, greatly increased workloads, reduced professional esteem, all of which represented a reduction of quality in higher education' (Henkel 2000: 97). In the light of the very small number of courses falling below a satisfactory level, Morley (2003: 61) aptly described the effort and expenditure on quality assurance as 'a sledge-hammer to crack a nut'. Bearing in mind the lack of justifiable concern about the quality of UK higher education in the first place, its focus on regulation at the expense of improvement and its many negative outcomes revealed in this thesis, I would expand Morley's metaphor with the comment that this sledge-hammer caused a considerable amount of collateral damage.

13.7 *What might have been done differently?*

13.7.1 Re-balance regulation and improvement

Much of this thesis has been concerned with exposing the negative aspects of quality assurance. On the other hand, few people in higher education would have disagreed with the laudable aim to improve the quality of teaching in universities and many who committed themselves to this aim in good faith were disillusioned by its culture and methodology. What then could have been done differently to make quality assurance more relevant to the promotion of effective learning?

Undoubtedly its negative effects on staff were inimical to the effectiveness of quality assurance and could have been mitigated by a different approach. The discourse analysed

in chapter 11 section 4.4 clearly demonstrated that the government's prioritisation of regulation and accountability over improvement was limiting the beneficial impact of quality assurance on teaching and learning, and this balance needed to be reversed. Brown (2004: 162) also regretted that the excessive focus on competition and comparative judgements of performance were 'the wrong targets' which did nothing to promote quality improvement. Sharp saw regulation as '*a kind of safety belt ... the formal bit of accountability*' (I: 4) but not the most important route to improving quality.

To achieve this, a change of motivation was needed: the ideal would be to reduce the level of external regulation to a minimum (achieving the desired 'lighter touch') while encouraging voluntary improvement by academics. This fundamental re-balancing between the two would have to be accompanied by investment of the necessary time and resources in teaching and learning to contribute to improvement of student learning.

As time passed, the calls for this kind of change grew stronger. The government's persistent failure to respect its own much repeated mantra that universities had responsibility for their own quality gave rise to a growing recognition of 'the greater effectiveness of internal over external processes' (Harvey, 2010 (2): 104) a point also emphasised by Biggs (2003) and in the *European Standards and Guidelines* (ENQA, 2005).

13.7.2 Define high quality teaching

An early and continuing criticism of quality assurance from academics was that the criteria for high quality teaching which would logically constitute performance indicators for quality assessment were not clearly defined. This debate surfaced again in Gibbs' report on *Dimensions of Quality* (2010) which emphasises the importance of using research evidence 'to ensure that our quality processes are informed to a greater extent by what we know about what constitutes effective practice' (Gibbs, 2010: 4). He identifies a number of factors 'known to work in terms of educational effectiveness' which he recommends should become the performance indicators for quality assessment. He cites research evidence that large classes adversely affect the quality of student engagement so class size is likely to be an important indicator of quality. There is also evidence of the beneficial influence of employing staff with teaching qualifications because students adopt a more 'surface' approach to studies when courses are delivered by unqualified research students or non-faculty. The volume, quality and promptness of teachers' feedback are also reliable predictors of good educational outcomes.

13.7.3 Quality assurance for transformation

Nearing the end of this study, I return to ‘the transformative notion of quality’ which ‘assumes that higher education must concern itself with transforming the life-experiences of students, by enhancing or empowering them’ (Harvey and Knight, 1996: 14). Gibbs (2010: 11) refers back to the same idea (originally defined by Harvey and Green, 1993) when he includes the concept of ‘quality as transformation’ as an indicator of effective teaching which will involve ‘enhancing the student in some way’.

13.7.4 A favourable culture

One prerequisite for achieving this kind of transformation is to create a culture where teaching is valued (Biggs, 2003: 274). The promotion of high quality learning requires a working environment ‘based on trust and conducive to innovation’ (Brown, 2004: 171). In the early days of quality assurance, Holmes (1993: 7-8) believed that ‘the personal fulfilment of the individual’ was a core aim of institutions ‘whose *raison d’être* is driven by quality and not ... where those in the driving-seat are striving simply to test for and demonstrate quality’. Ten years later Biggs (2003: 268) commented that enhancement of teaching will depend on the involvement of ‘teachers thinking as teachers’ to drive change from the grass-roots up rather than administrators or senior managers responsible for implementing externally imposed systems. According to Sharp, when staff are motivated and committed, *‘that’s where you begin to see the whole thing come alive. They’re doing it not because QAA or anybody else tells them they’ve got to do it, they’re doing it because they want to do it, they see it makes a difference to their students... What really is going to drive this forward is not somebody wagging a finger. It’s hearing about really interesting practice and wanting to try that or a variation of that yourself’* (I: 4). In such favourable conditions the transformative potential of quality assurance can be released.

13.7.5 Close contact between teachers and learners

Importantly, Gibbs (2010: 21) cites evidence from a large American survey by Pascarella (1980) that ‘close contact’ involving at least some interaction between teachers and students is an important feature of education. This idea is frequently echoed by other scholars, for example, Henkel (2000: 107) who was convinced of the benefits of ‘close and individualised attention to students and the quality of their learning’ achieved through small-group teaching and close scrutiny of their written work. On the basis of these

endorsements and my own approach as an adult educator, I would argue that despite the challenges of high student numbers, if personal contact between teacher and student had been included among the criteria for assessment of teaching during the period covered by this research, the history of quality assurance might have been very different.

13.8 Quality assurance is here to stay

In my interview with Barnett I posed the question ‘in view of so many criticisms, why do we tolerate quality assurance?’ to which he gave a pragmatic but illuminating answer: *‘We tolerate it because it suits the interests of different parties. It suits the interests of the state but it also suits the interests of senior managers in the sector. If you can show that you’ve done well in the evaluations and can put that on your website it may just help in securing a few more students from China’* (I: 8).

Whether we like it or not, quality assurance is part of the modern world in any professional setting as well as in industry, an intrinsic feature of accountability, professional accreditation, service delivery and consumer rights, particularly where public money is involved. It is logically and ethically impossible to argue against the promotion of good quality, and ensuring quality depends on a process of audit. While many quality assurance systems are cumbersome, time-consuming and expensive, in principle they are still needed. In the case of higher education, as with any activity depending on human interaction, if they are to deliver improvements, great care is needed in definition of the criteria and design and implementation of the assessment methods.

Quality assurance should not be accepted unquestioningly. Williams thought there were risks that it was becoming an end in itself rather than a means, and not itself subject to independent assessment. *‘Rather than being judged against its effectiveness and its value and usefulness, it’s become part of the establishment’*. He therefore actively asserted the need *‘to challenge its right to exist’*. (I: 9). Managing effective quality assurance systems requires commitment, care and hard work: in a telling phrase quoted by Williams (2009: 1) *‘quality is not an accident’*. Nor should its operation be allowed to go unchallenged.

CHAPTER 14: EPILOGUE

That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach' (Huxley, 1959: 1)

The final part of this study gives a brief overview of developments in UK quality assurance in the decade following the 2004 Higher Education Act.

14.1 *Thoughts from 2015*

The introduction of the new quality assurance arrangements by the QAA from 2002 was succeeded by a more stable period. Quality assurance structures and systems were embedded in all universities and had become a fact of life. Publication of information for students increased through the Teaching Quality Information website from 2004 (later Unistats) and the National Student Survey from the following year (Griffiths, 2014: 11). Nevertheless, political scrutiny continued. In 2008-09, accumulating concerns about university standards in a number of universities resulted in a critical report by the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee which gave rise to serious challenges to the QAA's practices. Recommendations in the Browne Report (*Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*, 2010) and the Conservative/Liberal Coalition's White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (2011) led to a strengthening of the Institutional Review process and replacement of the Academic Infrastructure with a new Quality Code (Griffiths, 2014). The QAA's mission remains 'to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education' (QAA 2014). It retains responsibility for the four countries of the UK, with some variations in devolved areas. The new Quality Code covers the whole of the United Kingdom. Scotland also contracts the QAA to carry out quality assurance activities on its behalf, though there are significant differences in its review systems (see Appendix 4).

14.2 *Continuing trends*

The association of higher education with business in the government's mind was emphasised in 2007 when responsibility for higher education was moved from the Department of Education and Skills to the newly created Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and subsequently, through another merger in 2009, to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Thus the word 'education' no longer appears in the title of its sponsoring department. Previous issues relating to accountability,

academic autonomy and bureaucratic demands still caused some friction between universities and the state, with resulting negative effects (Murphy, 2009). Financial stringency continued under the Coalition from 2010 and Treasury demands for significant savings once more put pressure on quality. The Browne Report (2010: 8) notably re-stated the triangular challenge that has run like a refrain through this study: ‘in formulating our recommendations we had to balance the level of participation, the quality of teaching and the sustainability of funding’. A White Paper (BIS, 2011) outlined proposals for a more risk-based approach to quality assurance, reducing the frequency of reviews for universities with a record of high quality provision. A continuing managerialist ethos is exemplified by new systems of monitoring staff performance, while students are asked to complete module evaluation questionnaires (MEQs) evaluating lecturers who may have to achieve minimum scores ‘in order to pass probation’ (Grove, *THE*, 23 October 2014).

The increasingly international scope of quality assurance was evidenced by adoption of *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (2005, updated in 2015) which include commitment to independent external quality assurance operating external cycles of review. The QAA is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and was the first agency to be judged ‘fully compliant with all aspects of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance’ (*QAA Annual Report to HEFCE 2012-13*: 5).

14.3 2011 White Paper: Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, 2011)

From 2005 students’ views of their university experience were published in the National Student Survey and fed into the all-important Rankings which were guides to choice in the competitive market. With 45% of people between the ages of 18 and 30 entering higher education, an increase from 39% in 2000, (Browne, 2010: 2) students were referred to as ‘the most important clients of higher education’ (BIS, 2009: 71) and the level of fees, increased by the Coalition government in 2010 to £9,000 a year, reinforced their position. The QAA Annual Report to HEFCE for 2012-13 noted ‘a more consumerist approach’ among students during the first year in which fees had risen to this level (QAA, 2014: 7). The paramountcy of student status was summed up in the title of the 2011 White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011). The government once again began to promote the use of charters detailing for students ‘what they can expect and what is expected of them’ (BIS, 2011: 3) and students’ status as arbiters of quality was attested by their presence on all QAA review teams from 2011 (BIS, 2011: 36).

The Browne Report (2010: 2) re-emphasised the well-worn political mantra that ‘competition generally raises quality’ and the White Paper announced the establishment of an expanded *Key Information Set (KIS)* of easily comparable information to be added to the information already on the Unistats website by 2012. Concern was expressed that this kind of quantifiable information ‘commodifies education into a tangible service’ while ‘qualitative information on the individually transformative nature of the learning experience’ was impossible to provide through the *KIS* (Williams, 2013: 76). Brown (2012) pointed out the irony of a situation where the provision of public information itself has been added to the aspects for QAA assessment (BIS, 2011: 36).

In recent reflections Ming Cheng (2014: 286) has advocated a more constructive concept of ‘quality’ in higher education, ‘not just for summative evaluation purposes but to encourage student commitment to learning, in order to increase student engagement and enthusiasm for a positive educational experience’. The White Paper (BIS, 2011: 34) emphasises the importance of student engagement, remarking on the fact that a number of very different institutions (the Open University, Buckingham and Oxford and Cambridge) which consistently do well in the National Student Survey share a commitment to close contact with students and regular academic feedback. The QAA (2014: 6) emphasised that students are now engaged as ‘informed and constructive partners’ in developing quality methods and promoting enhancement. Bovill (2013) discussed the recent academic interest in engaging students as partners in a process of ‘co-creation’ in learning and teaching which is argued to contribute to student ‘empowerment’. Moving from the ideas of ‘critical pedagogy’ of the 1970s and 1980s which encouraged students to use their new knowledge to challenge power relationships and promote social change, this less political concept of student engagement has tended to focus more on increasing representation in university structures and quality assurance processes in which the student voice will increasingly be heard. In addition, concepts of ‘partnership’ and ‘co-creation’, often not clearly defined, can extend to a wide range of activities including curriculum design and course planning, negotiation of marking criteria and opportunities for student feedback (Bovill, 2013). Though this approach can bring rewards, the process of genuine learner empowerment can seem ‘unfamiliar and risky’ to academic staff who will thus need special development to acquire new skills in facilitation and student support (Bovill, 2013: 6).

14.4 *Déjà vu*

Some surprising recent developments induce a dispiriting reaction of *déjà vu*. In October 2014 the higher education sector was taken aback by an announcement from the Funding Councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland of their intention ‘to seek views on future approaches to the assessment of quality in higher education’. The declared aim is ‘to develop innovative approaches that are risk-based, proportionate, affordable, and low-burden’ at the same time as ‘building on existing good practice and demonstrating value for taxpayers’ and students’ money’ (HEFCE, 2014). A parallel process was set in train in Scotland and at the end of the consultation process the existing contract with the QAA will be re-tendered. Reasons for this move were stated fairly vaguely in terms of the requirement to respond to changes in higher education and to deliver value for money. The ensuing debate has included some support for potential change, reiterating concerns raised about aspects of QAA’s performance in previous years, but also external support for the agency’s track record in protecting quality (McGhee, *The Guardian*, 20 October, 2014) and warnings against abandoning the principle of having a single regulatory quality body (Brown, *THE*, 9 October, 2014).

The QAA itself has mounted a spirited defence of its fitness to build on systems developed in partnership with the sector over almost 20 years. In his speech to the Annual Reviewers’ Conference on 29 June 2015, the Chief Executive, Anthony McClaran, emphasised that ‘QAA is not accidentally the provider of external quality assurance: it is the body set up by the sector, endorsed by governments across the UK and an embodiment, in its governance and operations, of the key principle of co-regulation’. He reiterated a number of existing principles on which the QAA would build for the future:

- respecting the autonomy of universities to assure their own quality
- ‘keeping students at the centre’ by regularly seeking their views and including them in quality assurance processes
- reducing the burden of data collection by using reliable information from other sources
- increasing the focus on quality improvement at all levels by encouraging innovation and good practice and making reviews more enhancement-led
- providing public assurance through published reports

A week after HEFCE launched the latest consultation document on its proposals, *Future Approaches to Quality Assessment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, (HEFCE, 2015/11), a further shock to the system was delivered in a speech by Jo Johnson, Minister for Universities and Science in the recently elected Conservative government, whose language harked back to the rhetoric of the 1990s. He honoured a manifesto commitment to ‘root out bad teaching’ by introducing a ‘Teaching Excellence Framework’ (TEF) to include ‘a clear set of outcome-focused criteria and metrics... underpinned by an external assessment process undertaken by an independent quality body from within the existing landscape’ (Speech to Universities UK, 1 July 2015).

More or less controversial proposals include the following:

- a ‘risk-based’ approach to replace cyclical QAA reviews for well-established universities with annual reports by university governing bodies to HEFCE vouching for the academic standards of their institutions
- a proposal to link quality assessment with funding, this time by allowing providers of high quality teaching to charge higher tuition fees
- use of graduate earnings levels as indicators of teaching quality
- indicators related to educational processes including class size, SSRs, student effort, independent working, quality and timeliness of feedback (Gibbs, 2010)
- measures of students’ independent learning skills
- metrics of student engagement as piloted in a UK Engagement Survey (UKES) undertaken by the HEA
- methods of quantifying learning gain developed in the US which involve students in sitting entry and exit tests
- the percentage of teaching staff with formal teaching qualifications
- class observation as a method for evaluating quality of teaching

A Green Paper incorporating comments from academics is expected in the autumn.

All of these issues are complex and likely to produce benefits and disadvantages. Questions about how to devise and agree such metrics have already reignited old debates and initiated new ones, starting with a reminder of the problems caused by the ‘fuzziness around defining ‘quality’ in higher education, let alone measuring it’ (Palfreyman, *THE*, 23 July, 2015). There is a risk that the government, the quality agencies and the universities will once again become mired in controversies about measurement which distract from improving practice.

How government promotion of the TEF will dovetail with the projected HEFCE reforms already under consultation remains to be seen but these proposals clearly threaten to recreate a situation reminiscent of the double whammy of audit and assessment between 1992 and 1997. To those remembering the wasteful and divisive consequences of that era for the whole of higher education, the possibility that such a fate should once again be inflicted on universities in the name of improving the quality of teaching and learning defies belief. Anyone interested in future of quality assurance in UK higher education will fervently hope that those responsible for these decisions will have learned some lessons from history.

14.5 *Postscript, January 2016*

The Green Paper, published on 6 November 2015 under the grandiose title *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (BIS, 2015) has already become the subject of criticism. It is predicted that the TEF, intended as a mechanism for increasing tuition fees on the basis of improved quality, will inevitably create a complex bureaucracy which will deter the universities from involvement if fees are only allowed to increase in line with the current very low rates of inflation. Students may become disillusioned if success in the TEF results in higher fees. Academics are unlikely to accept the ‘robust’ statistical metrics proposed for assessment as reliable indicators of quality. It is as yet not clear whether the Office for Students billed as a ‘new sector regulator’ will take over HEFCE’s role or whether the QAA’s life will be prolonged as its latest assessments are to be taken as the basis for the first round of the TEF in 2016.

Also published in November was HEFCE’s report on the responses to the June Consultation Paper on the future of quality assessment (HEFCE, 2015/11). This expressed broad support for earlier proposals, though there was concern about plans to make the external examiner system more like a national inspectorate and to extend the oversight of university governing bodies to academic quality and standards. These debates continue.

Both the Green Paper and the HEFCE documents emphasise the need for co-operation. BIS is expected to work with HEFCE, ‘mindful of the need to ensure that the overall quality assurance system does not introduce duplication or increase bureaucratic burden on providers’ (HEFCE, 2015/11: para 112). For readers who have followed the story of quality assurance through these pages, such pious aspirations will have a hollow ring.

APPENDIX 1

Introductory Statement to Interviewees

University of Glasgow | School of Education

Plain Language Statement**Researcher**

Sally Kuenssberg, PhD Research Student, University of Glasgow School of Education.

Invitation

You are invited to take part in a research study. The following information explains the purpose of the study and what part you are being asked to play. Please take time to read the information carefully and ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

The study

The overall purpose of my study is to explore the impact of quality assurance systems on teaching in UK universities from the late 1980s onwards.

The first part of the study will look at why and how quality assurance approaches were adopted and the effects of these approaches. The investigation will include a series of interviews.

The data collected from these interviews will also inform the second part of the study, which will focus on how quality assurance systems are operating in Scotland today.

The interviews

I am approaching you and a number of other individuals to take part in this study because your first-hand experience in the world of higher education during the relevant period will enable you to provide important insights into the issues I am exploring.

I will invite you to take part in an interview with me lasting a maximum of two hours at a location of your choice. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any point.

I will seek to explore a broad range of topics but the structure and extent of the discussion will depend on your interest and the information you wish to offer.

Should the time allocated prove insufficient, there could be an option with your consent to continue the discussion in a further interview or by telephone.

The interview will be tape-recorded and a full transcript sent to you for verification. You can withdraw any or all of your comments at any point.

Confidentiality

You will be given the choice of anonymity in this project. If you choose to be anonymous, however, it is not realistic to guarantee that you will not be identified by readers.

When I send you the transcript of the interview, I will ask you to indicate:

- Which parts of the transcript must be removed
- Which parts (including direct quotations) may be retained anonymously

- Which parts (including direct quotations) may be retained and attributed to you if you choose to be named.

I am carrying out this research independently and receiving no funding from any other source.

The proposal for this study has been reviewed by The Ethics Committee of the College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow.

Contacts for Further Information

If you require any further information, please contact me at s.kuenssberg.1@research.gla.ac.uk or telephone me on 0141 339 8345

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of the research project you can contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer Dr Georgina Wardle at georgina.wardle@glasgow.ac.uk

APPENDIX 2

Interview Themes and Questions

The semi-structured interviews will be based around the following questions. Follow-up questions will arise from the points raised by each interviewee. The interviews will be recorded and a full transcript sent to each interviewee for verification and approval.

- 1 Why did the quality of teaching become a pre-occupation in UK higher education during the late 1980s and early 1990s?**
- 2 How far was the introduction of systems to audit and assess the quality of higher education linked with developments in other public services at the time?**
- 3 Why did the proposed quality assurance arrangements for higher education evoke such debate within universities? How was their resistance overcome?**
- 4 What kind of methods do you think should be used to evaluate the quality of university teaching?**
- 5 What changes took place in universities during the 1990s as a result of the implementation of quality assurance systems?**
- 6 In your experience what has been the impact of these systems on the quality of university teaching?**
- 7 How far have the quality assurance arrangements themselves been evaluated and can any conclusions be drawn?**
- 8 What are your views on the different path now being followed by QAA Scotland with its explicit emphasis on 'enhancement'?**

APPENDIX 3

Themes and Categories from NVivo Coding

Government policy

Rationales for QA
 Accountability
 Government control
 Political focus on HE
 Challenges for HE

Theories of quality

Definitions
 Purposes of QA
 Methodology- industrial model
 Paradoxes of QA – accountability v enhancement
 Unintended consequences

Operation of quality assurance

Approaches to QA
 QA methodology and implementation
 QA structures
 Phases of QA
 Impact of QA – positive and negative

Quality ‘debate’

Academic attitudes and culture
 Bureaucratic burden
 Costs
 Standards and measurement
 University resistance
 Resistance overcome

Quality ‘industry’

Writing about QA
 Careers in quality
 Consultations, evaluations, and reports
 League tables and rankings

Relationships and discourses of quality

External
 Within Universities
 Political

University teaching and learning

Factors relating to quality
 Staff training and development
 Status of teaching
 Teaching and learning developments

Students

Information to students – consumer choice
 Student views
 Student experience – motivation

Impact of QA

Overall judgements

APPENDIX 4

Scotland is Different

Since the implementation of quality assurance in UK in 1992, its operation in Scotland has always been separate from England, in keeping with their separate higher education systems and Funding Councils. For the first decade, however, the two countries operated very similar quality assurance systems.

During the period of disruption at the QAA in England from 2001, the QAA Scottish Committee decided to follow a different path in order to place greater emphasis on enhancement rather than external regulation. In governance terms, QAA Scotland remains part of the QAA with Scottish representation but the practice is significantly different.

In 2003 Scotland developed its own Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) coordinated by a Universities Quality Working Group with members from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Universities Scotland, QAA Scotland, the Higher Education Academy and the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland. The QEF consists of five interrelated aspects:

- A comprehensive programme of institution-led reviews, carried out by higher education institutions with guidance from the Scottish Funding Council
- Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR): external peer reviews run by QAA Scotland involving all Scottish higher education institutions over a four-year cycle
- Improved forms of public information about quality, based on addressing the different needs of a range of stakeholders, including students and employers
- a stronger voice for student representatives, involving students in quality management in higher education. Representatives from Student Partnership in Quality Scotland (sparqs) and NUS Scotland work with QAA Scotland to improve the effectiveness of student engagement in quality processes and provide advice to the SFC and institutions on good practice in student engagement
- A national programme of Enhancement Themes, managed by QAA Scotland, which encourages academic and support staff and students to share current good practice and collectively generate ideas and models for innovation in learning and teaching

Enhancement is at the heart of practice, ‘taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement’ in Scottish higher education. The Enhancement Themes programme aims to encourage academics, support staff and students to work collectively to generate innovation in learning and teaching. The aim is to enhance the student learning experience

in Scottish universities through identifying specific areas (themes) for development, and providing time and space for the sector to carry out this development. Staff and students are encouraged to share good practice, to generate ideas and models for innovation in learning and teaching, and to learn from useful examples of work from other countries. This collaborative and integrated approach to quality is unique in many respects: the balance between quality assurance and enhancement; the emphasis that it places on the student experience; its focus on learning and not solely on teaching; and the spirit of partnership between staff and students that has underpinned all these developments.

Material from the following nine Enhancement Themes completed by 2013 is fully documented and available on the QAA website:

- Assessment (2003-04)
- Responding to Student Needs (2003-04)
- Employability (2004-06)
- Flexible Delivery (2004-06)
- Integrative Assessment (2005-06)
- The First Year: Engagement and Empowerment (2005-08)
- Research-Teaching Linkages: enhancing graduate attributes (2006-08)
- Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes (2008-11)
- Developing and Supporting the Curriculum (2011-14).

The tenth and current theme is Student Transitions, running for three academic years 2014-17, focusing on transitions into, out of and during university. Work on 10 key topics is being shared among several institutions thus facilitating joint working and sharing of good practice.

There is little doubt that the cohesiveness of the sector in Scotland, the four year frequency of the enhancement led reviews and the early participation of the student body has imparted a different character to quality assessment in Scotland, a topic that deserves a separate study.

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