

## **Sherpa Bernstein, exploring the power relations in the quality assurance of higher education in the UK?**

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Higher education has a high profile in UK society. Knowledge is linked to individual and national economic wealth (Peters, 2003; King, 2006; Shattock, 2006) and consequently there are an increasing number of individuals with a vested interest in the reputation of UK universities: students, parents, employers, the media, government, and the academic community. One means of safeguarding and legitimising this reputation, required by the State, is through external review. This paper will focus on one organisation involved in this safeguarding, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). QAA was established in 1997 to integrate the existing forms of external scrutiny that had been taking place in the UK since the late 1980s, with the mission to:

*‘safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education’* (QAA, 2006, p2).

QAA, however, does not hold statutory or regulatory authority<sup>1</sup>/ It operates on the premise that universities are autonomous, independent bodies that have the primary responsibility for academic standards and quality, as set out in the 1995 Further and Higher Education Act. In addition, QAA is funded predominantly through contracts with the funding councils and by subscriptions from UK universities themselves. QAA therefore functions in a complex environment of multiple stakeholders (actors) and multiple roles<sup>2</sup>: This interesting position and the tensions it raises, warrants further analysis through an exploration of the role and positioning of QAA in the political and societal fields, and its influence on the recontextualisation of knowledge in higher education. Such analysis is particularly apt as the role and authority of QAA has been brought under the spotlight as a result of concerns raised in the media in June 2008 about the standards of UK degrees. This concern resulted in the parliamentary Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee Inquiry into students and universities which concluded that *‘the system in England for safeguarding consistent national standards in higher education institutions is out-of-date, inadequate and in urgent need of replacement.’* Although in response the Government stated that it did not *‘recognise the committee’s description of our higher education sector, which is in fact world class and second only to the USA as a top destination for overseas students. We are also seeing record applications from our own students, who value the benefits of a UK degree’* (Mandelson, 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Statutory responsibility for the quality of higher education is held by the funding councils for higher education in each of the four countries in UK.

<sup>2</sup> to promote and maintain quality and standards in universities; enhance teaching and learning and identify and promote innovation and good practice in teaching and learning; provide information and publish reports on quality and standards in higher education; and provide advice to government as requested (HEFCE, 1996).

Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing, provide powerful tools to identify the tensions and power relations between the different actors in higher education and its quality assurance, and also to explore the nature of the communication between these groups. The distributive, recontextualising and evaluation rules provide a means to examine in detail who controls and recontextualises discourses within higher education and who are the producers, reproducers and acquirers of this discourse in late modernity (Bernstein, 2000). Do QAA's significant regulatory, enhancement, and informative roles mean that it is a site of the recontextualisation of discourses in higher education? Who influences this recontextualisation, the State, the Universities? What is the nature of QAA's relationship with the State and universities, is QAA the official recontextualising field because is it an agent of the state or is it a champion of the pedagogic recontextualising field?

In undertaking this analysis it has been helpful to firstly establish the context for quality assurance in the twenty first century. This paper will therefore draw on my preliminary research has explored the historical perspectives of higher education discourse in the UK and mapped the shifting sites and agents of this discourse and its recontextualisation. From this analysis I derive a typology to characterise university types, each type reflecting an ideological model of universities in the UK on which to map Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing in order to identify the tensions and power relations (Moore and Maton; 2001 and Maton, 2002, 2004). I have termed the three models **doctrinal**, **secular** and **vocational**.

The **doctrinal** model reflects a set of perceptions which begins from the premise that the ideal-type university is a community of scholars in which individual students seek fuller personal development. Education at this level is identified with a concern for excellence that emphasises the innate worth of a non-utilitarian and 'pure' ethos. The associated image is heavily redolent of the medieval link between religion and knowledge. All educational activity takes place within the exclusive setting of a self-governing community in which the preservation of standards and the definitions of excellence fall within the sole prerogative of senior members of the academic body, whose primary objectives are both narrow and inward-looking (Martin, 1969, p85).

The doctrinal model is strongly classified and the gap between the official recontextualising field and the pedagogic recontextualising field is minimal such was the power and control of the Church over the official discourse.

Increasingly, however, the dominance and exclusivity of the doctrinal model came under attack; non-Anglicans deplored the monopolistic hold over higher education of the Church of England and there was a move to follow Scotland and break the traditional link between Church and university. From the 1850s onwards, the scientific revolution established a stronger link between the universities and its parent society, with greater emphasis on the study of subjects which were linked to the local needs of industry (Briggs, 1969, p98): the **secular** model.

The secular model saw a weakening of the classification of the universities. Although the academy was established, its power was not that of the Church and greater interest in the higher education by the State ensued. Nevertheless, the State did not establish a national curriculum and the official recontextualising field was diminished (Bernstein, 2000, p60): the gap between the official recontextualising field and the pedagogic recontextualising field was significant and academic autonomy was created.

The third model is the **vocational** type where the purpose of the university was linked more closely to the economic, political and social needs of society. This has manifested itself in the establishment of new institutions<sup>3</sup> and new ‘innovative’ subject areas which have received much criticism, including the charge that they promote ‘trivial subjects’ (Minogue, 1973, p60). Thus some institutions welcomed external review as a means of legitimising their existence or curriculum development. The vocational model reflected a further weakening of the classification of the universities; although there was no formal official recontextualising field, the State was increasingly using its agents such as the funding councils (Bernstein, 2000, p 60) and some would argue QAA to indirectly regulate the recontextualising process and in turn weakening the insulation of the universities from the State.

The paper will explore the positioning of QAA in relation to the State and to the different types of universities identified above. Is QAA the enforcer of standards and controller of the pedagogic device; or the agent of the State weakening the boundary between disciplinary knowledge and applied knowledge; or the advocate, acting between the State and the universities; or the facilitator, encouraging the enhancement of the discourse? Who determines what this role is and does it vary depending on the ideological type of institution?

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<sup>3</sup> Although as Maton notes (2004, p222) the ‘new’ institutions often perpetuated many of the characteristics of the idealised ‘ancient’ universities.

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