

**From both sides of the table: the role of
the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher
Education**

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WISE WORDS

Professionally:

*'Quality.... you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is.... when you try to say
what the quality is.... it all goes poof!'*

(Pirsig, 1974)

Personally:

'Hurihia to aroaro ki te ra tukuna to atarangi kia taka ki muri i a koe'

'Turn your face to the sun and the shadows will fall behind you'

Maori Proverb

DEDICATION

To Mum and Dad for their constant and very special love and support.

To loved ones here and those who watch over.

To two incredible educators who saw something in me which others could not:

‘Biology’ Ogilvie and Professor Tom Reilly - I am forever grateful to you.

For Millie.

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Tremendous thanks goes to Professor Gareth Rees and Professor Gabrielle Ivinson for their patience, good humour and wise words. Your supervision got me started, and more amazingly got me to the end and to produce this thesis.

I must also thank my colleagues at the QAA and the three universities who generously gave up their time to participate in the research.

Dearest friends and family who listened and listened, and read and read to help me get the right words in the right order – thank you.

SUMMARY

The thesis analyses the relationship between the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and universities in England. It considers why the QAA still appears to be misunderstood and controversial, eighteen years after its establishment.

Differing representations of the QAA necessitates it using significant time and resources to explain its status and its relationship with the higher education (HE) sector. These representations also inhibit the maturation and refinement of the quality assurance system in England.

The professional issue explored is: *why is the QAA viewed and portrayed differently depending on who is making the assessment and in what context?* The aims were to provide an improved understanding of how different types of universities ~~and their staff~~ perceive, construct and appropriate the QAA and to provide a reference point for quality professionals to assess their own university's institutional practice.

The theoretical framing of this issue draws upon Bernstein's (1996) concepts of the pedagogic device and contextualisation. Empirically, thirty-two semi-structured interviews were undertaken between July 2009 and June 2011, supplemented by extensive documentary analysis. The experiences of staff at different levels within three types of English university and from the QAA itself were explored in this way.

In answering the four research questions, the findings suggest that the universities consider it legitimate for the QAA to undertake certain roles, such as safeguarding academic standards, while other roles should be the sole responsibility of the universities. Reasons why the QAA is viewed differently include: the power related to perceived institutional position in the HE hierarchy of prestige, the public nature of the QAA's reports, contestation within the Pedagogic Recontextualising Field, and the multi-dimensional nature of the QAA's relationships.

The research also suggests that the recontextualising process that the QAA undertakes is complex. Through a process of engagement, facilitation and negotiation with the different elements of the higher education sector, the QAA attempts to balance the interests of a number of different stakeholders within the Official Recontextualising Field and the Pedagogic Recontextualising Field. The complexity is added to by the frequent contestation within and between these groups.

The findings also indicate that the different types of university, identified within the research have different capacities to recontextualise the QAA's messages at institutional level into the local setting. The extent to which the messages are mediated appears to be predicated on a number of factors. There is also a degree of recontextualisation undertaken at subject level.

Similarly, the extent to which the QAA has influence over what universities do also seems to be linked to the type of university. Although there appears to be some sector-wide influence in relation to internal university quality assurance structures and the specialist quality assurance language used.

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ACRONYMS

Academic Pedagogic Recontextualising Field	A-PRF
Academic Audit Unit	AAU
Central Pedagogic Recontextualising Field	C-PRF
Colleges of Advanced Technology	CAT
Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals	CVCP
Council for National Academic Awards	CNAA
Department for Business Innovations and Skills.....	DBIS
Her Majesty's Inspectorate	HMI
Higher Education	HE
Higher Education Academy	HEA
Higher Education Funding Council in England	HEFCE
Higher Education Review	HER
Higher Education Quality Council	HEQC
Her Majesty's Stationery Office	HMSO
Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills (Select Committee)	IUSS
Institutional Review for England and Northern Ireland.....	IRENI
Joint Planning Group	JPG
Management	MGT
National Advisory Body for Local Authority Education	NAB
National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education	NCIHE
National Student Survey	NSS
National Union of Students	NUS
Official Recontextualising Field	ORF
Pedagogic Device	PD
Pedagogic Recontextualising Field	PRF
Pro Vice-Chancellor	PVC
Quality Assurance Agency For Higher Education	QAA
Quality Assurance Framework Review Group	QAFRG
Research Assessment Exercise	RAE
Research Excellence Framework	REF
Standing Conference of Principals	SCOP
Teaching Quality Assessment	TQA
Teaching Quality and the Student Experience Committee.....	TQSEC
University Grants Committee	UGC
United Kingdom	UK
Universities UK	UUK

CHAPTER ONE THE STIMULUS, AIMS AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

1.0 Introduction

In this chapter I begin the research story by outlining the original stimulus for the research, and identifying the professional issue that I go on to explore in the thesis. I also discuss the aim and purpose of the research and why it was valuable to undertake. I introduce the focal point for the study, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and set out the professional and academic contexts for the research. Finally, I describe what is to come in the rest of the thesis.

1.1 The stimulus and professional issue

*'...here we go again!' I'm at a very nice drinks reception prior to my husband receiving his national teaching fellowship and I'm playing the dutiful wife. It's been a very pleasant evening so far gently chatting with the other guests, all of whom appear to be academics. When asked what I do, I nonchalantly say 'Oh, I work in University admin' and move the conversation on swiftly. I look over to my husband, as usual we've drifted away from each other whilst chatting, he's looking nervous, so I head back over to him and give his arm a reassuring squeeze. Then from my left comes the question and in a tone which means there is no escape 'So Elaine, what **do** you do for a job?' I pause, take a very deep breath, put on my warmest smile and say..... 'I work for the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.....', there's absolute silence.....*

The following day there's an organised trip to the Victoria and Albert Museum, the weather is reasonable and so the organisers ask if we're happy to walk. I recognise quite a few of the academics from the previous evening and *'that moment'*. During the trip a number of them come up to me and say (quietly) that they've been a reviewer for the QAA and really enjoyed it and felt it a worthwhile role. For the briefest of moments the QAA is a positive entity.

These two types of reactions to the QAA were fairly common in the seven years that I had worked at the Agency. We were interchangeably seen as both Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, often depending on the stance taken by the media and/or the politicians on a particular day. It meant that working for the QAA felt like walking a tightrope, trying to keep the views of all those with vested interests in higher education in balance. This was not helped by the various myths about the Agency within the higher education sector: these appeared to be self-perpetuating, although why this was the case was not always clear.

Why after more than ten years since the QAA was established, and seven years since its move away from the controversial subject level review of universities, was there still such variation in how the role of the QAA was understood, and how the Agency was perceived? At the time, I expected that as the QAA matured those working in the universities might have a better understanding of it, its purpose and rationale.

The overarching professional issue for the research is therefore **why is the QAA viewed and portrayed differently depending on who is making the assessment and in what context?** An analogy for me is an organisation with a series of different faces reflecting different stances, which are visible to certain onlookers at certain times.

The pertinence of the professional issue is that the different representations mean that the QAA has to devote significant time and resource to reiterating its actual status and purpose, as well as clarifying the nature of its relationship with the universities. The position being that the QAA does not work in isolation from the higher education sector, but is sponsored and guided by the sector's representative bodies and academic experts. The consequences of these multifarious representations for the QAA are three fold: it reduces the QAA's resources available to focus on assuring academic standards and quality; for senior managers it means that the QAA operates in an unstable and changing context depending on which representation is most prevalent, making strategic

thinking and planning difficult; and for the QAA staff, it means that they end up being process orientated spending their time being conduits and interpreters between the universities, the Government and the public.

The premise of the research is an acceptance that external quality assurance by the QAA is an inherent part of higher education and one to which I subscribe. The research therefore will not discuss whether quality assurance is a legitimate part of higher education, or what is meant by the notion of quality in higher education. Nor will the research explore the link between the funding of higher education and the status of self-governance of universities and external quality assurance mechanisms. All of these discussions can be found elsewhere¹.

1.2 Scope and Terminology

At this point, it is helpful to discuss briefly the scope of the research and the terminology used in the thesis.

The scope of the research is the universities in England, although reference is made to the United Kingdom where appropriate. England was selected because although the QAA has a UK-wide remit, devolution across the UK means that the QAA's review methods and guidance materials function under slightly different contexts within different higher education systems. Trying to account for these differences would make the analysis of any data problematic. In addition, most of my experience working at the QAA was in relation to higher education in England. As an important part of the professional doctorate is a reflection on my professional experience, it seemed appropriate to focus on England alone.

¹ For example, see Silver and Silver (1986); Green (1994), Harvey (1995, p8ff); York, 1996; Melrose (1998, p41ff), Newton (2002); Barry and Ginns (2007); Van Kemenade, Pupius and Hardjono (2008), Filippakou (2009), and Saarinen (2010).

The research took place between July 2009 and June 2011, although reference is made, at appropriate points in the thesis, to more recent events in order to enhance the research's currency. This was a period of some significant change for the QAA as I discuss in more detail in section 1.5.1.

I use the term **universities** in relation to institutions which have the right to use the protected title 'university' in their name. This right will have been achieved either by the granting of a Royal Charter or Papal Bull², or through legislation.

I use the term **higher education providers** to refer to the broader range of organisations that provide higher education programmes in England. In addition to the universities these include Further Education Colleges and for-profit private providers.

I refer to the **Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education** as both the QAA and the Agency.

1.3 Aims of the Research

With the professional issue in mind, the overall focus of the research is the QAA and its relationship with the universities in England and the Government. At the start of the research a single aim was identified: to provide the QAA with research-based intelligence to support it in its strategic planning for the next ten years of operation. At the time I began the professional doctorate, the QAA was shortly to celebrate its ten year anniversary. I thought that the new understanding gained from the research could enhance the QAA's operation. For example, understanding how a university is likely to perceive and interpret the QAA can be used to establish the degree of compliance that an individual higher education provider is likely to apply in relation to the QAA's guidance. Once established, the Agency can determine the amount and type of support

² An instrument issued by the Pope to found or recognise a university. Examples are the University of Aberdeen (Graham, 2008, p28), as well as the Universities of Glasgow and St Andrews. A Papal Bull was issued to the University of Oxford to recognise it (Anderson, 2006) and the status of the University of Cambridge similarly recognised in 1430 (Simon, 1979, p44).

necessary to ensure that individual institutions (continue to) take responsibility for safeguarding academic standards and quality. Blind compliance to the QAA's guidance, as in the UK Quality Code, misses the point of quality assurance in higher education. As Brown (2004, p151) notes, quality *'is best protected by institutions' own quality arrangements, which reflect and reinforce the values and professionalism of staff and the individuals within them'*. Therefore they should be thinking about the 'what', 'how', and 'why' they are trying to do in relation to safeguarding academic standards. In doing so, they will meet their responsibilities through having the powers to set their own academic standards and award degrees under their own auspices (Williams, 2009, p4). Without sufficient engagement and thought on the part of providers, politicians and the government are more likely to demand a move away from the current collaborative regulatory system to a more inspectoral one (see section 1.4 below).

Life, however, was not quite as straight forward as planned and in 2011 I left the QAA to move to New Zealand. Two and half years and several earthquakes later, I was back in the UK working for a university in a quality management role. In effect I was now on the other side of the table to the QAA. As a result, a further aim became clear in order to support such quality professionals. The aims of the research therefore were:

- i) to provide those working at the QAA with an improved understanding of how different types of universities and staff within them perceive, construct and appropriate the Agency.
- ii) to provide a reference point against which quality professionals can assess their own university's institutional practice, in order to provide more effective support to colleagues in developing and implementing quality assurance processes, which are appropriate to the values and culture of the institution **and** contribute to the improvement of the quality and standards of teaching and learning in that institution.

Underlying these aims was also the very personal nature of the stimulus of the research. This meant that I was not only a researcher, but also a participant in the research itself. This had implications not only for the conceptualisation of the professional issue, but also for the research questions, as well as the research methodology. It was clear that a *qualitative* approach was the most appropriate research strategy as I wanted to explore the experiences of staff in the universities and the QAA. This is an issue to which I return in more detail in Chapter four.

In meeting the above aims, the research thereby achieves the purposes of professional doctorates which ‘*aim to develop an individual's professional practice and to support them in producing a contribution to (professional) knowledge*’ (QAA, 2008a, p25). The research adds to the empirical data about the QAA by providing an insider perspective of the Agency itself, in addition to the university perspective. I also wanted to provide an insight from different levels within the universities, *and* from those within the QAA. Research in how quality assurance is viewed in universities has involved interviewing academics and senior managers³. If such research includes a QAA perspective, it usually involves interviews with the Chief Executive or other members of the Directorate⁴, rather than those who undertake the work directly with the universities, the Assistant Directors.

In addition, the research aims to broaden the scope of the empirical data available. A review by Harvey and Williams (2010) of the research published in the Journal ‘Quality in Higher Education’ over 15 years, suggests that much of the previous empirical research in relation to the QAA has focused more on the Agency’s specific review

³ See, for example Morley (2004) and Evans-Bibby (2004).

⁴ The Directorate is the senior management team of the QAA.

methodologies or guidance materials⁵, rather than on the role of the Agency itself and how it is perceived across and within universities, and within the QAA.

With the professional issue and the three aims of the research in mind, four research questions were developed. Broadly these explore how the role of the QAA is understood, how it is translated into local university settings, the degree of influence that the Agency has over what universities do, and how the Agency mediates the requirements of key stakeholders in developing its guidance and review methods. These questions are set out in more detail in Chapter three (see section 3.3).

1.4 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

The QAA was established in 1997 with the remit to promote public confidence that the quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced (QAA, 2000, p1). The Agency is funded predominantly through contracts with the UK funding bodies and by subscriptions from universities and other higher education providers. The Agency has multiple stakeholders and multiple roles based around its quality assurance, enhancement and advisory functions.

Although it is depicted in the press as a ‘watchdog’, the QAA does not hold statutory or regulatory authority. It operates on the premise that universities are legally independent, self-governing autonomous bodies and as such have primary responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards and quality (Education Reform Act, 1988; Further and Higher Education Act 1992).

Since 1990, the external quality assurance of UK higher education has been based on a system of collaborative regulation which incorporates elements of institutional self-regulation, which is a non-negotiable requirement for the universities (Stoddart, 2004, pxi), and external assessment undertaken by academic peers (Jackson, 1997, p121).

⁵ Guidance materials such as the National Qualification Frameworks and subject benchmark statements.

According to Jackson (1997, p122-123) this system is based on university self-interest and consensual agreement with the government. Deem, Hillyard and Reed (2007, p189) suggest this consensual regulated autonomy was adopted because of the persistent failure of academics to suggest any viable alternative. Morley (2003, p165) describes this phenomenon as the '*TINA effect*' – '*there is no alternative*'.

1.5 Context for this Research

1.5.1 Professional context

The data collection for the research was undertaken between 2009 and 2011, a time when the QAA was under the spotlight following a series of uncoordinated events in the summer of 2008 which raised significant concerns about falling academic standards. These events resulted in intense media and political interest and significant recrimination (Williams, 2009, p24-26; Brown, 2010, p129; Jackson and Bohrer, 2010, p77). The events of that summer marked the end of a period of relative stability for the Agency after the cessation of subject level review in 2001 and the resignation of the Agency's first Chief Executive the same year. During that period the Agency was deemed to be doing a good job, in an appropriate manner and at a reduced cost (HEFCE, 2005b).

The events of summer 2008 and the subsequent fallout meant that by the time my data collection began, the Chief Executive at the QAA, the Chief Executive designate and other members of the senior management team had appeared before the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills (IUSS) Select Committee. The QAA was subsequently criticised in the resulting report for focussing '*almost exclusively on processes, not standards*' and therefore not safeguarding academic standards fully (House of Commons, 2009a, p5, p97); for not operating appropriate mechanisms to investigate concerns raised by individuals or organisations about higher education (House of

Commons, 2009a, p96); and for drifting into a role of promoting the brand UK Higher Education (House of Commons, 2009a, p97). Within the Agency there was a sense that difficult times were ahead (see Chapter two). It was already a time of significant change for the QAA, with the appointment of a new Chair of the Board in the spring of 2009, and the recent appointment of a new Chief Executive due to take up his post in early October 2009. In addition, as a result of the IUSS Select Committee's review and report, although not fully supported by the Government, both the HEFCE and the higher education sector's representative bodies (UUK and GuildHE) had to defend/justify their roles in relation to quality assurance, albeit from different perspectives. In the case of the HEFCE the consequence was a more hands-on approach to working with the QAA (see section 3.2.4).

Subsequently, the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (the "Browne Review") in 2010 made its recommendations in relation to a revised funding mechanism for higher education. In addition to recommending that students should make a larger contribution to the cost of their learning, the Review also recommended that the QAA should be merged with the HEFCE, the Office for Fair Access, and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator to form a single Higher Education Council (Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, 2010, p46). While the Government rejected this suggestion for a single Council, this recommendation reflected the Agency's potentially precarious position.

The subsequent higher education policy of the new coalition Government and the White Paper '*Students at the Heart of the System*' (DBIS, 2011) marked the further marketisation⁶ of the higher education sector⁷. For example, the White Paper proposed/endorsed the lifting of the cap on tuition fees to a maximum of £9,000 for

⁶ In this context, '*marketization*' is described as the application of the economic theory of the market to the provision of higher education (Williams, 1995)

⁷ Brown and Carasso (2013) suggest that the higher education system in England first moved towards a marketised based system from the 1980s onwards.

institutions; universities being able to recruit as many students as they liked with A-levels at the grades AAB or higher; opening the sector to new providers subject to achievement of the QAA's taught degree awarding powers; and changing the status of students within the higher education system.

In addition, the White Paper also signalled an intention to review the arrangements for external quality assurance in England; this was to be led by the HEFCE and sponsored by the sector's representative bodies. The review itself, however, took place after the research data were collected.

1.5.2 Academic context

The study was conducted at a time when researchers identified the vastly complex and contested nature of the quality assurance of higher education in the UK (Newton, 2002, p47; Brown, 2004; Cheng, 2009; Filippakou and Tapper, 2008, p84), with some describing it as only serving a bureaucratic, administrative and resource allocating function (Evans, 2004; Morley, 2004, Cheng 2009, p200; Harvey and Williams, 2010, p24), Others on the other hand were able to demonstrate instances of genuine improvement in academic standards (Horsburgh, 1999; Dill, 2000, Morley, 2003, p170, Harvey, 2006, p289). Increasingly, researchers were considering the consequent implications of the further marketisation of the sector and the implications for its regulation (Alderman and Brown, 2005, p314; Barnett and Coate, 2005, p29, Brown, 2011). Some researchers spoke of there being little real value to quality assurance while institutional reputation remained the key influence on students and employers (Locke, 2011, p77-81). The failure of quality assurance to stimulate academic staff and student engagement was also being discussed (Turnbull, Burton and Mullins, 2008, p15). Researchers such as Harvey and Stensaker (2008, p427) identified the lack of a quality culture within universities as a significant problem in a rapidly changing higher education system.

What is evident from these two context related sections is that the research was carried out at a particularly turbulent and uncertain time for the QAA.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis comprises eight chapters. Chapter two sets out the context for the research in more detail by firstly introducing the development of regulation and audit in the public service sector in the UK, before going on to discuss the introduction of quality assurance in higher education. In doing so, the chapter begins to explain the historical antecedents which influenced the formation and subsequent evolution of the QAA. It also begins to problematise the professional issue identified and explore the relationship between the QAA, the universities and the Government.

Chapter three discusses the theoretical framework used to explore the research questions. It provides the rationale and justification for drawing on the work of Basil Bernstein, before identifying the key concepts to be used and identifying the four research questions. It concludes by applying the analytical framework to five examples of the Agency at work, in order to clarify the issues to be explored.

Chapter four outlines the methodology adopted for the research and the data collection techniques used. It discusses the implications of undertaking research within my employing organisation and in universities which it reviews. The chapter describes the coding and analysis processes used. I discuss the limitation of the research in the concluding chapter of the thesis (Chapter eight).

Chapters five, six and seven present the analysis of the empirical data, in relation to how the role of the QAA is perceived and understood: the guardian of academic standards and institutional autonomy; a structural engineer influencing the internal university structures and power relations; the nature of the recontextualising process undertaken by the QAA; the existence and consequences of ‘mission creep’; the difficulty of

perceptions versus reality about the QAA; and the challenges of mutuality within a quality assurance system. Chapter seven then goes on to discuss how the ‘recontextualising’ process which is undertaken by the different universities and the degree of influence the QAA has over what universities do. The Chapter ends by reflecting on whether the research questions have been answered.

The final chapter discusses the broader implications of the research findings in the context of the overarching professional issues. It also discusses the implications of the research for the Quality Assurance Agency and those working in the universities as quality professionals. In doing so the final chapter considers the view from both sides of the table.

CHAPTER TWO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I will briefly discuss the introduction of a quasi-regulatory framework to public sector services in England to set the context, before discussing the historical antecedents of the Agency itself. This will begin to suggest possible reasons why the QAA might be viewed multifariously.

I will also begin to translate the overarching professional issue into a series of more focused issues, which in turn will form the research questions set out in Chapter three. In doing so, I will highlight the complex nature of the Agency's relationship with the universities, the HEFCE, and the Government.

While I discuss the evolution and purpose of external quality assurance in higher education, I do not debate what is meant by 'quality' in higher education teaching. This is a concept which is notoriously difficult to define, is highly contested and is constantly being (re)constructed (Badley, 1992, p21; Barnett, 1994, p68; Saarinen, 2005, p12). As noted in the previous chapter such discussion can be found elsewhere.

As this first part of the chapter describes the historical differentiation in the status of higher education providers in relation to their external quality assurance requirements, the second broadens this discussion to consider the stratification that is found in the higher education sector in England. The purpose of this is to begin to explain why a comparative approach based on different 'types' of universities is an appropriate consideration in the research methodology. In this context, the chapter suggests a means of categorising the some 100 universities in England at the start of the research.

2.1 The Emergence of External Quality Assurance in England

The introduction of external review in higher education can be traced back to the late 1970s⁸ in the context of the public higher education sector, and to three key factors. Firstly, there has been significant change in successive governments' ideology with regards to the public sector and the welfare state (Scott, 1995, p71). The increasing dominance of what is now referred to as 'managerialism' in government policy has meant that the arrangements to demonstrate accountability and transparency in the public sector, particularly from the 1980s onwards, have changed from informal mechanisms based predominantly on trust, to more formalised procedures based on concepts imported from the private sector. These procedures have often used independent bodies as the means of implementing and monitoring performance (Power, 1994, p15, p16; Scott, 1995, p78). A prime example is the establishment of the National Audit Office and the Audit Commission with their many audits: academic audits, governance audits, health and safety audits, sustainability audits, data audits, forensic audits. All of which has meant that scrutiny and judgement is now commonplace in the public sector. In turn this has led to a progressive weakening of the elite professional bureaucracy in the public sector, replaced by greater reliance on the market and direct public service delivery to the consumer (Power, 1997, p43; Henkel, 2000, p4; Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007, p6, 7-10; McGettigan, 2013, p2). The concept of 'audit' is now a naturalised part of the public sector, along with new power relations between the government-backed '*inspectories*' undertaking the audits, and those being audited (Shore and Wright 2000, p59).

⁸ For a discussion about the establishment of internal and external mechanisms to safeguard academic standards in universities in the nineteenth century see Silver and Silver (1986, pp10-15).

Secondly, the expansion of the higher education sector from its original elitist form to a ‘*mass system*’⁹ in 1988, and then to a ‘*universal system*’¹⁰ in 1994 (Becher and Trowler, 2001, p4; Parry 2001, p122), has led to greater demands being placed on public funding. In turn the Government has had little choice but to seek evidence of value for money in order to meet its responsibility to the tax payer (Frazer, 1992, p16). The escalating cost of higher education has encouraged, and to some critics necessitated the persistent review of the quality of provision within the sector (Moodie, 1986, p1).

The massification of the sector has also been accompanied by a greater diversity of students entering universities, and a broadening of the curriculum to meet market demand and economic imperatives set by the government. These two factors have contributed to increased public and ministerial concern about their potential negative impact on academic standards and reputation of the sector (Moodie, 1986, p3; Becher, 1989, p140; Frazer, 1992, p16; Trow, 1996, p208; Williams, 1997a, p111).

Thirdly, as the economic and global ‘value’ of knowledge and therefore its contribution to the UK economy has increased, the relationship between higher education and the external world has changed significantly (Becher and Trowler, 2001, p11; Parry, 2001, p120; Singh, 2002, p575; Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007, p5). The government now takes a greater interest in protecting higher education as an entity. For example, the right to award degrees and use the title ‘university’ were protected by legislation in the Education Reform Act (1988) and the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) (UUK, 2010, p32).

2.1.1 Implications for the universities

Although still relatively autonomous compared with many public sector institutions (Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007, p1), Parry (2001, p18) suggests that from 1979

⁹ when participation rates surpassed 15 percent in 1988 (Becher and Trowler, 2001, p4)

¹⁰ when participation rates exceeded 40 per cent in 1994 (Parry, 2001, p122)

onwards the formal independence of universities, in relation to strategic and operational matters, was significantly eroded. The higher education policies of Thatcher's Conservative Government in the 1980s meant that the concepts of stronger corporate management, effectiveness, efficiency, value for money and audit entered the sector's vernacular (Power, 1994, p2; Deem, 1998; Shore and Wright, 2000, p57; Parry, 2001, p118, 119; Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007, p5).

The Jarratt report (1985) was commissioned by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP)¹¹ in part to forestall further government intervention through efficiency reviews seen elsewhere in the public sector. In the eyes of knowledgeable observers it symbolised acquiescence by the sector to the introduction of the principles of managerialism across universities (Scott, 1995, p66).

The introduction of what can be characterised as managerialist practices into higher education saw a reordering of authority within the universities, with the effect that the power held by academic self-governance lessened (Scott, 1995, p66; Williams, 2009, p10). Internal changes within the governance of universities saw a transition from the '*donnish*' university, to the '*democratic*' university, and towards the '*managerial*' university (Scott, 1995, p4). For academics the implications were significant:

'...for many, if not most, academics there has been a fundamental loss of control – over work organisation and professional culture... universities [have been] transformed from “communities of scholars” into “work places”.'

(Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007, p2)

Scott (1986, p145) suggests that there was also a more practical reason for such changes. The continuing expansion of the universities in particular, meant that as organisations they required more centralised and active management and administration

¹¹ CVCP was the representative body for universities at the time. Its history can be traced back to the early 19th Century and informal meetings of university vice-chancellors followed by its formal mandate being secured in 1930. CVCP's successor body Universities UK (established in 2000) has some 133 members (UUK, 2011).

systems. Williams (1992, p142) also suggests that there was increasing frustration in the government, with the 'old' universities in particular which were accused of being *'unaccountable, unresponsive, non-relevant, badly managed and generally ill-fitted to meet the needs of the new entrepreneurial world'* (Williams, 1992, p142). Increasingly, the government looked for mechanisms to keep surveillance over higher education in order to maintain the momentum of greater accountability and efficiency (Parry, 2001, p120; Filippakou, Salter and Tapper, 2010, p549). In this context, some form of external assessment mechanism in relation to teaching and learning was required.

2.2 External Regulation of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

While the focus of this research is the QAA and its relationship with the universities and the government, the Agency has strong historical antecedents which influence many of its principles/values and the way it works. The following section therefore outlines briefly the key developments leading up to the establishment of the QAA in March 1997. For a more detailed analysis see Henkel (2000); Brown (2004) and Williams (2009).

Before the QAA

From the mid-1960s until the inception of the QAA in 1997, a dual system of quality assurance in higher education existed in England: one informal for the universities and one for the remainder of the publically funded sector (see Figure 1). For some of the 50 or so autonomous universities the external examiner system¹² was a source of review, although this was not consistently applied (Becher, 1991, p155; Williams, 1997b, p80). The University Grants Committee (UGC) established in 1919¹³, was a body dominated

¹² Reliance was placed on the external examiner system, introduced in the UK in the 19th Century, to ensure comparability of standards of awards within disciplines and across institutions (Williams, 1992, p142). It remains a key component of internal quality assurance processes today, albeit with continued criticism in some quarters.

¹³ UGC operated until 1988 and was deemed to have been successful in maintaining standards of the university system (Shattock, 1986, p50).

by senior academic staff, and acted as a buffer between the Government and the universities. It provided advice to the Government regarding resource allocation, based in part on information gathered from its quinquennial visits to the universities to assess the institutions' proposed priorities for the next five years (Shattock, 1986, p47; Silver and Silver, 1986, p15). In exchange for this buffer, universities were to keep national needs in mind when developing their academic programmes and priorities (Halsey, 1969, p136; Parry, 2001, p118).

In this context, according to Brown, institutional quality assurance in the universities was '*still largely a tacit process, with small and varying amounts of formality and codification*' (2013, p423). In contrast, public sector higher education institutions¹⁴ operated from the mid-1980s under the auspices of the National Advisory Body for Local Authority Education (NAB) in relation to resource allocation, and from the 1960s the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA)¹⁵ and Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) for the award of degrees and teaching effectiveness and use of resources (Silver and Silver, 1986, p23).

¹⁴ The public sector included the polytechnics and higher education colleges.

¹⁵ Established by Royal Charter in 1965.

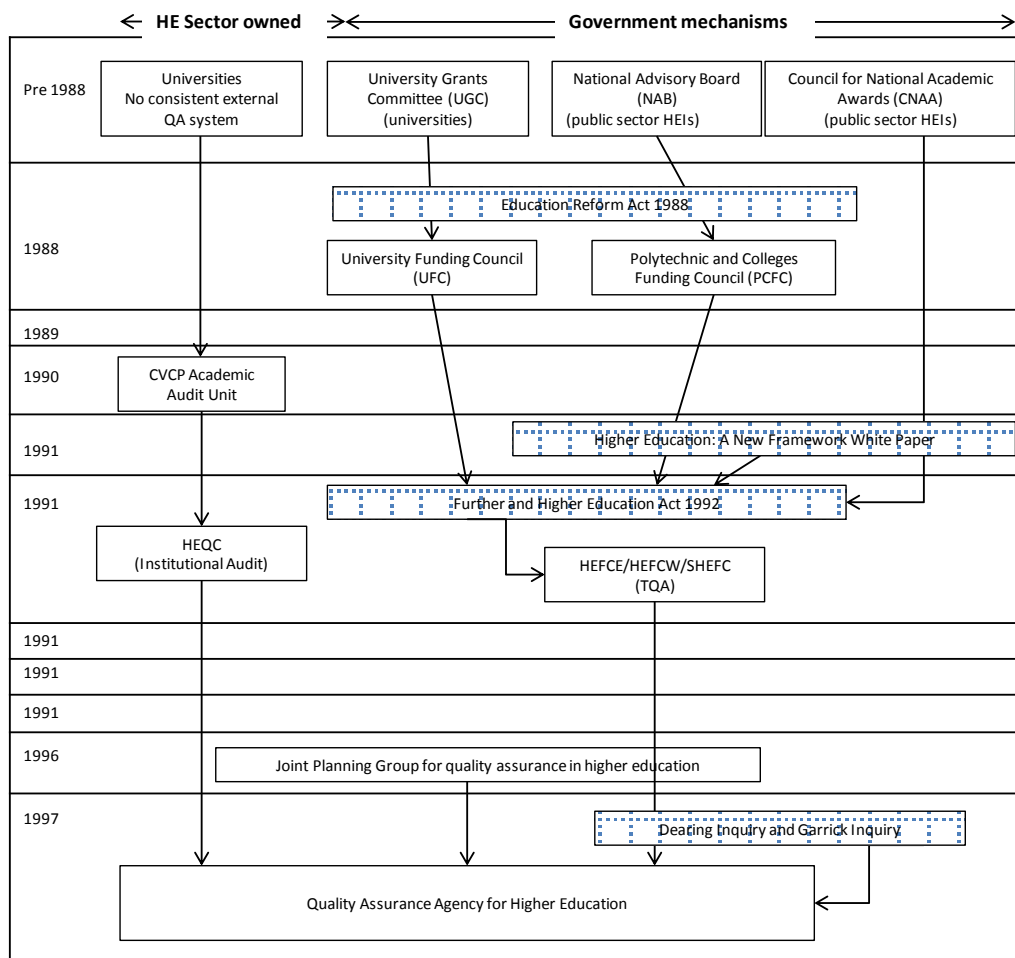


Figure 1 Adapted from QAA (2008b) *The history of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education*

The Government's acceptance of the Lindop report¹⁶ in 1985 reduced the burden for some polytechnics somewhat by enabling certain institutions to award degrees on behalf of the CNAA. This was however, predicated on the institution being validated by CNAA to do so, and on them undertaking their own internal quality assurance processes (Brennan, 1989, p137). The Lindop report, according to Williams (2009, p9), was less than complimentary about the role of the universities in safeguarding academic standards of the provision they validated. It recommended that there should be a single body charged with maintaining oversight of university validation in general.

¹⁶ The Lindop report was the *Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Academic Validation in Public Sector Higher Education*, chaired by Sir Norman Lindop.

Realising the emerging threat to their academic autonomy, the universities, through their representative body, CVCP, sought to take the initiative and undertook a number of activities with the aim of: demonstrating the quality of university higher education, vindicating current practices and making sufficient recommendations to show that the sector was responsive to the environment ¹⁷ (Booth and Roper, 1992, p 277; Williams, 1992, p143). For example the Reynolds report (1986) ‘Academic Standards in Universities’ reaffirmed and reinforced the importance and value of the external examiner system as a means of maintaining comparability (Silver and Silver, 1986, p15; Trow, 1996, p205). It also incorporated three formal codes of practice for the sector on: the external examiners system; postgraduate training, research, and appeals; as well as a paper on universities’ internal procedures for monitoring academic standards (Williams, 1992, p143; Henkel, 2000, p69).

In 1990 CVCP set up their own ‘external’ quality assurance function, in an attempt to pre-empt the perceived threat from the government to introduce an inspection regime (Williams, 2009, p1; Brown, 2013, p424). The Academic Audit Unit (AAU) was established in October 1990 and undertook reviews of universities at institutional level (institutional audit) using a small cadre of auditors nominated by their vice-chancellors from 1991 (Williams, 2009, p4). The reviews were on a voluntary basis and there was no evaluative judgement. Reports were not published and recorded ‘*points for further consideration*’ rather than recommendations (Sursock, 2011, p118). This deliberate ‘*gentle*’ approach, based on a spirit of courtesy, modesty and respect, was seen by its Director as the only way to maximise the likelihood of acceptance and respect within the sector (Williams, 2009, p8).

The establishment of the AAU was a clear example of CVCP, under its then leader Professor Stuart Sutherland, leading the university sector, acting to safeguard its

¹⁷ CVCP set up the Academic Standards Group to look at the issue of quality and standards, chaired by Philip Reynolds, former Vice-Chancellor of Lancaster University.

academic autonomy, and being allowed to do so by the government. However, the Unit only operated for 18 months. But its formation established the precedent of the higher education sector owning the body that undertakes external review on its behalf, a precedent that is still visible in the governance and operation of the QAA today.

In 1992, the Further and Higher Education Act marked another significant development in the quality assurance of higher education, with the re-designation of polytechnics as universities, the abolition of the CNAAs, and the establishment of the new Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales¹⁸. Each had a statutory responsibility to assess the quality of education provided by the institutions they funded (HMSO, 1992, p53; Morley, 2004, p15). Each Funding Council was required by the legislation to have means to satisfy itself that the higher education they purchased on behalf of the public represented good value. Each of the three Funding Councils set up an internal quality assessment group to undertake quality assessments, based on a methodology developed in spring 1992 by HMI. In England the reviews were conducted through the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) method which used a sampling basis to look at courses and resulted in judgements being made in relation to six ‘aspects’¹⁹ of higher education provision and in published reports (Morley, 2004, p15) (see section 3.2.1).

Due to time constraints, the Government did not attempt to rationalise the existence of AAU and the new Funding Council in 1992, and the AAU was followed by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) - an organisation that continued to be owned and funded by the higher education sector itself. In keeping with this, the HEQC undertook the institutional level audit of universities’ (old and new) quality assurance mechanisms

¹⁸ The Funding Councils replaced the short lived (1988-1992) University Funding Council and the Polytechnics and Colleges University Council which replaced the UGC and NAB respectively.

¹⁹ The six elements considered were: curriculum design, content and organisation; teaching, learning and assessment; student progression and achievement; student support and guidance; learning resources; quality management and enhancement. These were graded on a four point scale and provided that each aspect was graded 2 or better, the quality of the education was approved (QAA, 2009b).

and structures (Williams, 2009, p10). Reports continued to be judgement free and unpublished until 1995 when a report to HEQC by Coopers and Lybrand recommended that outcomes in HEQC academic audit reports be differentiated by level of urgency (Brown, 2013, p425; former QAA colleague, personal communication, 2015).

In addition, the HEQC also provided the universities with guidance materials to support them in developing their quality assurance systems. Such guidance was, as is the case with the QAA, drawn directly from the academic expertise within the sector and within the HEQC itself.

In this context it is possible to suggest that the HEQC remained part of the sector or at the very least was at its edge. In contrast, the Quality Division within the HEFCE was very much an arms-length agent of the Government and deemed to be more of a threat to academics as they were assessing the quality of teaching directly. Such assessments were exceedingly controversial and disliked, despite the use of academic peers within the reviewing teams (Morley, 2003, p17). Morley also suggests that some within the sector viewed subject level review a *'valuable opportunity for organisational development and reflection'* (2003, p17), but this was only a minority.

In 1995 the outcome of the Barnett Review, commissioned by the HEFCE to review TQA, recommended that the review method be abolished, or moved from a sampling to a universal basis. There was a suspicion within the sector that Barnett was trying to 'break the system' with his latter suggestion for a universal approach (former QAA colleague, personal communication, 2015). The latter approach was accepted by the HEFCE and a new method 'subject review' was established. This decision increased the burden of external review and resulted in pressure from a number of vice-chancellors on the Secretary of State who in turn requested that the various systems be amalgamated, not least to reduce recurrent costs (Morley, 2004, p17). In the period between the announcement and the establishment of a Joint Planning Group (JPG) to develop

detailed proposals for a single agency, there were a number of heated discussions and examples of the sector through its representative bodies, particularly CVCP, influencing the Government. Indeed, Brown (2004, p105) provides some interesting examples of the Government having to withdraw proposals or alter plans in the light of significant objections from CVCP. Brown also notes however the warning the Minister for Higher Education issued to CVCP members at its conference in 1995, stating that the consequence of failure to agree on a new system would be the continuation of the current one (Brown, 2004, p106). Such actions exemplify the complex power relationship between the Government and the universities not least because of the autonomous status of the universities.

Within the JPG it was ultimately agreed that the purpose of the new single agency should be to *'provide a service for assuring the quality of higher education and standards of programmes and awards for higher education institutions in England, Northern Ireland and Wales and, if appropriate, HE institutions in Scotland'* (HEFCE, 1996). In return for the promised reduction in the assessment burden, the universities had to accept that their ownership of the system would be reduced and shared with the Government via the Funding Councils (Brown, 2013, p427). This marked a move away from ownership of its own quality assurance body, HEQC, by the higher education sector alone. The critical issue was whether this single agency would mark a further shift away from the sector being able to influence its own regulatory system and towards greater control by the Government.

The JPG met between January and November 1996 to develop plans for the new agency. Membership included representatives from CVCP, the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP)²⁰, the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals, and the Funding Councils. Assessors from the Government departments were also present.

²⁰ The representative body for higher education colleges is now GuildHE.

There was however no direct representation from HEQC on the Group (Brown, 2004, p110-111). HEQC's input took place mainly at a more operational level through the working group set up to develop the more detailed plans. This pattern, of excluding HEQC from strategic level decision-making by the representative bodies of the sector and the HEFCE (the Government) has been repeated for the QAA, particularly in the period after 2009 (see section 3.2.4).

After some significant negotiations, the QAA was incorporated in March 1997 as '*an independent entity, legally owned by the representative bodies of the institutions but funded by a combination of institutional subscriptions and funding council payments*' (Brown, 2013, p427). Its new Board, new Chief Executive and staff formally took over HEQC's functions on 1 August 1997. This meant that although the QAA is independent in its operation, the national strategies to which it works are decided upon by the representative bodies acting on behalf of the sector and the Funding Councils acting on behalf of the Government (Williams, 2009, p16-17). In this context the QAA is, according to Williams, one of its former Chief Executives, simply an advisor (Williams, 2009, p17). He states that the QAA's role is '*to turn strategy into operational reality*'; and in doing so protect the boundaries of autonomy of the universities, once they have been (re)negotiated with the HEFCE (Williams, 2009, p17), although the QAA's first Chief Executive might not have seen the Agency's role in quite the same passive way (former QAA colleague, personal communication, 2015). This is potentially an interesting dilemma. Part of the QAA's role appears to be closely linked to the sector - protecting the boundaries of the autonomy of the universities, yet most of its work is contracted by the HEFCE, as the QAA's primary funder and an agent of the Government²¹.

²¹ After 2010, HEFCE contribution to the QAA's overall budget reduced as the Agency undertook contracts for other Government Departments. For example QAA's work for the Home Office in relation to Highly Trusted Status and Review for Educational Oversight for

Equally, within the QAA's operationalisation process, there is input from the sector and the Funding Councils through the structure of the QAA's Board of Directors, which at its inception comprised four representatives appointed jointly by the representative bodies for higher education²², four representatives appointed jointly by the Funding Councils²³, and six independent members including the Chair, appointed by the Board. Officers of the Board comprised the Chief Executive of the QAA and members of the Directorate. Observers were from the relevant government department (Brown, 2004, p122), although this has since been opened to officers of the Funding Councils or equivalent, the officers of the representative bodies, the Higher Education Academy and a student representative nominated by the National Union of Students. Over time further changes have taken place to reflect changes to the structure and funding of the sector. For example, the inclusion of a representative on behalf of the further education colleges delivering higher education provision²⁴ and a change in the status of students from observers to full members (see section 3.2.3).

With these structures and historical antecedents, the QAA sits in a complex position between the sector, the Government and their agents, and students.

The mandate for much of the QAA's work arose from the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education²⁵ (1996-1997) (NCIHE) chaired by Lord Dearing²⁶, and commissioned by the Government to:

privately funded organisations recruiting overseas students onto higher education or related courses.

²² Currently – Universities Scotland (previously Higher Education Scotland), Universities UK (previously CVCP), Higher Education Wales and GuildHE (previously SCOP).

²³ Department for Employment and Learning (Northern Ireland), Higher Education Funding Council for England, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and Scottish Funding Council.

²⁴ The representative from the further education colleges is nominated by the UK Council of Colleges subject to approval by the Board.

²⁵ A separate Standing Committee chaired by Ron Garrick (the Garrick Inquiry) was established to advise the National Committee on the distinctive nature of the education system in Scotland.

²⁶ Lord Dearing was the Chancellor of the University of Nottingham

'make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years'

(NCIHE 1997, p5)

The Committee was established in May 1996 by the Government with the agreement of the Opposition in the light of the increasing (financial) crisis facing the higher education sector and threats by the universities to take things into their own hands (Watson and Bowden, 2007, p7-8).

Although not all of the recommendations from the Dearing review were accepted by the Government²⁷ in relation to quality assurance, the QAA's agenda was significantly wider than that of HEQC (Brown, 2004, p116). It included the need to:

- assure the quality of higher education provision;
- verify standards of awards against recognised standards of awards;
- develop/maintain external reference points such as a qualifications framework²⁸;
- develop a code of practice relating to particular areas of activity, such as collaborative provision and postgraduate work;
- develop sources of public information about the quality of programmes through for example programme specifications²⁹; and
- advise government on the award of degree-awarding powers.

(NCIHE, 1997, chapter ten).

The QAA therefore had two main areas of work: quality assurance and development. This mandate also places the QAA in an interesting position. On the one hand through its quasi-regulatory function, it operationalises the Quality Assurance Framework set

²⁷ The recommendation for the QAA *'to manage a strengthened external examiner system'*... and *'establish a UK-wide pool of academic staff from which institutions must select external examiners'* (NCIHE 1997, paragraph 10.93) was rejected by the Government after taking soundings with the representative bodies. However, concerns about the reliability and independence of the external examiner system have been raised periodically since then – for example in the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee's (IUSS Select Committee) review of the Student and Universities (House of Commons, 2009a).

²⁸ A proposed framework was outlined in the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997, Chapter ten).

²⁹ Programme specifications provide public information on the nature of courses, the intended outcomes of the programme, the knowledge, understanding and skills that a student will be expected to have upon completion and potential exit points during the programme of study.

out by the higher education funding bodies and the sector's representative bodies – a mixture of the Government and the sector working together to set the Framework. It also advises the Government (the Privy Council) on matters relating to degree-awarding powers and university title. In this context it is working solely, but at arms-length, for the Government.

On the other hand, the QAA's mandate requires the Agency to work closely with higher education institutions and their representative bodies to draw on their expertise in developmental work leading to guidance such as the Academic Infrastructure³⁰/UK Quality Code for Higher Education³¹. In developing these documents, the QAA acts as a facilitator bringing together staff from higher education institutions. As Brown (2004, p141) notes, however, the outcomes of these activities still relate to the QAA's regulatory function and concern remains within the sector that they are a means to introduce standardisation, leading to a loss of autonomy, diversity and innovation in the sector.

Even from this brief description of the QAA's role it would suggest that from the outset the QAA holds some form of mediating role between and with the Government and the higher education sector.

³⁰ The Academic Infrastructure was a set of nationally agreed reference points, developed in conjunction with UK higher education sector, which until 2014 gave all institutions a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the quality and standards of their higher education courses (QAA, 2009a). The Academic Infrastructures was made up of Subject benchmark statements, the Code of practice, the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications, and Programme specifications.

³¹ The UK Quality Code succeed the Academic Infrastructure in academic year 2012/13.

2.3 The Wider Context: the stratified sector

As noted in Chapter one, the overall professional issue being considered why the QAA is viewed and portrayed differently depending on who is making the assessment and in what context. The research is focused in England only and it is well documented that the sector is highly stratified and increasingly diverse (see Figure 2), with a perceived hierarchy of prestige based predominantly on institutional reputation formed from a variety of factors including the reputation of individual academics (Halsey, 1961, p341; Bernstein, 2000, p60; Becher and Trowler, 2001, p5). Although as Holmes (2001, p32) suggests, nobody is really keen to discuss the implications of the perceived hierarchy of prestige in higher education, including the student learning experience.

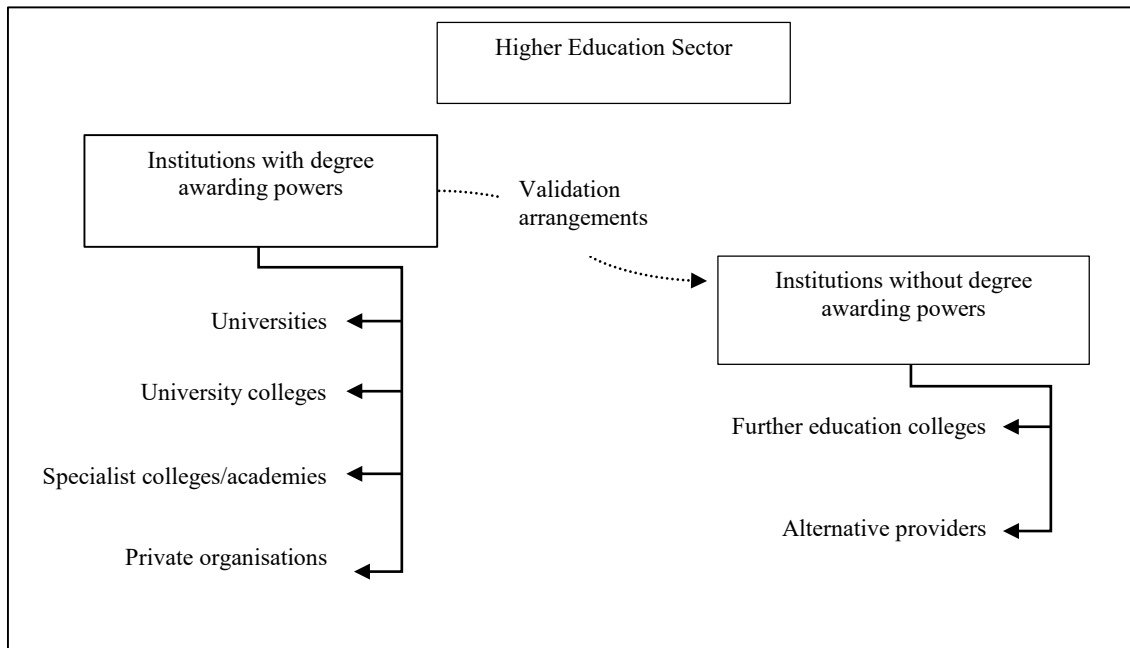


Figure 2 Types of institution in the UK higher education sector.

In England in 2014 there were some 337 higher education providers, of which 133 can award their own degrees³² (DBIS, 2014). Of these, seven organisations are privately

³² An organisation without degree awarding powers must work in formal collaboration with one that does.

owned³³; the oldest is the University of Buckingham which has held degree awarding powers since its incorporation as a university in 1973 and receipt of its Royal Charter in 1983. The most recent is RDI, a for-profit organisation that specialises in distance learning provision. There are 101 institutions that can formally call themselves universities (DBIS, 2014), a title that has been protected by government legislation since 1998. Between 2012 and 2014, three private providers gained the right to use the title ‘university’: BPP University, Regents University London, and the University of Law. Since gaining university title BPP University and the University of Law have been bought out by other companies. Such action caused some significant anxiety for the Government, and resulted in the QAA stating in its most recent review method (Higher Education Review) that a review would be triggered if a change of ownership takes place³⁴ (QAA, 2014a, p10).

The institutions described above only touch on the diversity that exists within the sector. Each will have their own mission, values, purposes and reputation and because of their reputation (predominantly) they will also perceive that they hold a different position within the perceived higher education hierarchy of prestige. This position will determine how well the institution is influenced by external factors. For example, those institutions considered to be towards the bottom of the perceived hierarchy of prestige are more likely to be responsive to market demand for particular courses or curricula. This is because the reputation of the university is not sufficient to attract applications from students alone. It is the offer available to students which will differentiate the university from its competitors and generate student demand for places. Those towards the top of the hierarchy, in contrast, can rely on the university’s reputation to attract applications from students. Demand outstrips supply and students are selected rather

³³ Ashridge Business School; BPP University; College of Estate Management; RDI; Regents University London; Richmond, the American International University in London; University of Buckingham; University of Law.

³⁴ The review must take place within four years of the change in ownership occurring, this may be the originally schedule review (QAA, 2014a, p10).

than recruited. Any influence from the market on the provision is more of an unconscious or selective incorporation (Bernstein, 1996, p74; McGettigan, 2013, p154; McLean. Abbas and Ashwin, 2013, p271).

In the context of external quality assurance, it is suggested that a similar demarcation based on position in the perceived hierarchy will steer how different higher education providers perceive, construct and appropriate the QAA. What is less clear is on what basis, and the extent to which this is done.

2.4 Empirical Considerations

One of the key dimensions of the professional issue being considered is the relationship between the QAA and the universities. Each of these will have its own unique response to the Agency. This however, is impossible to deal with empirically; so drawing on the literature regarding the development of higher education in England³⁵, I identified three ‘ideal types’ of universities. These then formed the basis for categorising the different universities in England before selecting three universities to approach to participate in the research (see Chapter four).

Other means of classifying the sector are available, but they were considered either too complex for selecting only three universities, or too generalised and based on historical timings. For example the notion of ‘old’ and ‘new’ universities which is predicated by the status of universities as at July 1992 when the Further and Higher Education Act marked the unification of the university and public sectors in UK higher education, and the single largest establishment of ‘new’ universities. An additional category sometimes used is ‘the noughties’ to describe institutions who gained university title from the beginning of the twenty-first century onwards. The timing of gaining university status does not necessarily reflect the values and culture of the university.

³⁵ See Briggs, 1969; Halsey, 1969; Reeves, 1969; Minogue, 1973; Brubacher, 1977; Salter and Tapper 1994; Halsey, 1995; Scott, 1995; Anderson, 2006; Graham, 2008.

Scott (1995, p44-50) outlined a framework identifying 12 sub-sectors in the British university system and at least five further sub-groups if you include the colleges of higher, further education and other private providers³⁶ (Scott, 1995, p49). While this framework is overly complex for the purposes of this research, the description of a number of the sub-sectors was helpful in drawing up my three ‘ideal types’. Other frameworks came to light after the data collection period, for example that used by Ashwin, Abbas, and McLean (2012) who identified four types of universities: selective, prestige, community and diversity.

In reviewing the literature, including Halsey’s (1995, p56) notion of the ‘traditional’, the ‘liberal’ and the ‘modern’ university, I identified three ‘ideal types’ of universities: the ‘doctrinal’, the ‘secular’, and the ‘vocational’ university. Each are characterised by a number of factors including: their historical antecedents, governance structures, curriculum³⁷, culture and values, affiliation to a mission group and susceptibility to external influences.

At this point two important caveats need to be stressed. Firstly, the ‘ideal types’ of universities are purely theoretical models. In reality a university will demonstrate characteristics from each type as they continually adapt to the changing landscape. For example many ‘vocational’ institutions, in reality, offer a broad curriculum at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Scott, 1995, p31), often because of the lure of the image of what a traditional university should be (see section 2.4.3).

³⁶ The sub-sectors and sub-groups are: 1) the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, 2) University of London, 3) Victorian Civic universities, 4) Redbrick universities, 5) Sui generis institutions of Durham and Keele, 6) Technological universities, 7) the Scottish universities, 8) the University of Wales and the University of Glamorgan, 9) Queen’s University and the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, 10) the Open University, 11) Old ‘new’ universities, 12) New ‘new’ universities, 13) Colleges of higher education and the subgroups of multi-faculty, liberal arts, mixed economy, specialised, 14) Further education colleges, 15) Corporate classrooms.

³⁷ To assess the nature of a university’s curriculum, I used top level JACS codes to classify academic subjects. The Joint Academic Coding System was devised by the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service.

Nevertheless, certain defining characteristics of each model can be seen more clearly within the culture and values of universities in England. It is my hypothesis that these characteristics contribute to the capacity of universities to recontextualise the QAA and its messages.

Secondly, when talking about the source of authority for a particular type of university, it should be recognised that since medieval times, universities have always operated within a political system. Therefore the relationship between intellectual authority and political authority has been continually (re)negotiated to different extents as circumstances change (Finch, 1997, p146). What has changed perhaps is the degree to which the universities influence these negotiations.

2.4.1 The ‘doctrinal’ university

Knowledge

The ‘doctrinal’ university has its foundation in the Christian-Hellenic tradition where the purpose of higher education is to produce good citizens and train the elite as future leaders and train the learned professions (Salter and Tapper, 1994, p9).

The ‘doctrinal’ university is a community of scholars in which individual students seek fuller personal development. There is a desire for knowledge, for self-expression, for the satisfaction of intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual needs, and for a fuller life (Ministry of Reconstruction, 1918, para 2). Education at this level is identified with a concern for excellence that emphasises the innate worth of a non-utilitarian and ‘pure’ knowledge. The associated image is heavily redolent of the medieval link between religion and knowledge (Eliot, 1936, p173; Newman, 1965; Graham, 2008, p12). The historical relationship within the monastic foundation between clergy and laity is replicated in the ‘doctrinal’ university by the relationship between tutor and taught. Teaching is based on a lecture-tutorial system, where teaching is more intimate. Low staff:student ratios are the norm. Students are inherently drawn from the best public

schools, and are intelligent, motivated and on graduation enter well paid (elite) jobs (Palfreyman, 2001, p11, p19).

Governance

In the ‘doctrinal’ university governance takes place within the exclusive setting of a self-governing community of scholars in which the preservation of standards and the definitions of excellence fall within the sole prerogative of senior members of the academic body (Martin, 1969, p85). The *demus* (one don, one vote) ensures that the academics are really in charge with even the rank-and-file academic able to challenge and control the university’s Vice-Chancellor and governing body (Palfreyman, 2001, p22), what Scott (1995, p62) refers to as the ‘*donnish*’ style of governance.

Curriculum

The primary objectives of this type of university are both narrow and inward-looking (Martin, 1969, p85). As Eliot notes (1949, p174) ‘*the first educational task of the community [of scholars] should be the **preservation** of education within the cloister, uncontaminated by the deluge of barbarism outside*’.

The curriculum therefore is predominantly made up of disciplines which Bernstein (2000, p54) describes as singulars (see section 3.1.4) and which are predominantly specialised knowledge structures. These might be the ‘hard pure³⁸’ disciplines such as physics, chemistry, or the ‘soft pure’ ones of sociology and psychology (Biglan, 1973, p198). The singulars are strongly insulated from external influences, although this does not necessarily mean that they are isolated from the outside world. Bernstein suggests that such disciplines were linked to the development of nationalism, Britain’s international position and the management of the empire (Bernstein, 2000, p54).

The curriculum in the ‘doctrinal’ model is perceived to be superior to those developed elsewhere because it favours the moral over the scientific:

³⁸ The concepts of ‘hard’ - ‘soft’ and ‘pure’ – ‘applied’ are dimensions of Biglan’s framework to characterise subject matter in different academic areas (1973, p198, 201-202).

'It may well be doubted whether we would ever have regarded any acquaintance with the material forces of nature as good substitutes for the intellectual culture derived from classical studies, or as equal to them in discipline value.'

(Fitch, 1987, p141)

*'The longer the older universities in this country can maintain some standard of classical education, the better for those who look to the future with an active desire for reform and an intelligent acceptance of change....the hierarch of education should be a religious hierarchy. The universities are too far gone in secularisation, they have too long lost any common fundamental assumption as to what education is **for**, and they are too big.'*

(Eliot, 1936, p173)

While as noted in the caveats above, the 'doctrinal' university is just a theoretical 'ideal type', its image of tradition influences significantly how it is perceived, even though universities such as Oxford and Cambridge have broadened their curricula significantly and now have more in common with a number of 'secular' universities.

As noted earlier, due to the culture of the close relationship between teacher and taught, learning is based on a lecture and more critically the tutorial system. The latter of which perpetuates the status of the student as a novitiate. Teaching is in small groups and on a more personal foundation (Minogue, 1973).

External influence

The 'doctrinal' university's power base arises originally from its close proximity to the Church and the regulative discourse, and subsequently its support from the Crown and the aristocracy (Halsey 1969, p131). Its continued role in producing Britain's senior civil servants, politicians and industrialists safeguarded its autonomy up until the 1950s and 1960s (Halsey, 1969, p131, p137). As Salter and Tapper (1994, p8) suggest, *'University and state were joined by a seamless web of shared understandings and values'*, matters were resolved informally. The notion of the universities not being

trusted by the Government, let alone pressured, was unthinkable (Salter and Tapper, 1994, p8).

Historically the 'doctrinal' university has significant wealth arising from endowments. Once the Government began to fund the higher education system in the UK, such wealth could be used as a lever of power, demonstrating a lack of reliance on the State for the continuation of the university (Palfreyman, 2001, p17).

Examples

Key examples in England of the 'doctrinal' model are the medieval and elite universities of Oxford³⁹ and Cambridge⁴⁰. These universities are operated on a quasi-autonomous and powerful college basis with its membership of an elected Head (Warden, President, Rector, Provost, Master), senior scholars (Fellows) and junior students (Scholars, Commoners, Pensioners), epitomising the scholarly governance structure of the 'doctrinal' university (Palfreyman, 2001, p9). The historical link between church and college was marked; fellows in Holy Orders carried on well into the nineteenth century the tradition of monastic education. Any new areas of curriculum development were only justifiable if linked to the purposes of God (Reeves, 1969, p65-66).

The demand in the early nineteenth century for an expanded provision of higher education in England witnessed the adoption of the 'doctrinal' model in centres outside Oxford and Cambridge. New institutions such as King's College in London (1828) and University College Durham (1831) were established; the latter having been founded through the initiative of the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral.

Increasingly, however, the dominance and exclusivity of the 'doctrinal' university education came under attack. For example, non-Anglicans deplored the Church of

³⁹ Oxford University was established in 1167 in response to English students being barred from attending the University of Paris (Palfreyman, 2001, p9).

⁴⁰ Cambridge University was established in 1209 in the light of difficulties with the local population in Oxford and the migration of some scholars to the safer enclave of Cambridge (Reeves, 1969, p69).

England's monopolistic hold over higher education; comparisons were also drawn with the position in Scotland, where the four universities⁴¹ were independent of the Church of Scotland. Accordingly, there was a move in England to break the traditional link between Church and university, aided by the Royal Commissions on Oxford and Cambridge (Salter and Tapper, 1994, p9). However, the notion of higher education as being an elite pursuit and universities a community of scholars remained (Salter and Tapper, 1994, p9).

Although the 'doctrinal' university sits more closely with the concept of the Humboldt University in Germany, where the community of scholars undertook intellectual inquiry (research) entirely for its own sake⁴², this 'ideal type' of university acknowledges the link between higher education and society, in as much as the university develops the elite who are well trained for their work and more able to make a positive contribution to society: it civilises the individual (Newman, 1965, p xxxi; Reeves, 1969, p61). Academic quality was taken as read, with the experience of its academics and peer review, in its purist form, being sufficient to uphold academic standards.

2.4.2 The 'secular' university

Knowledge

The initial characteristics of the 'secular' universities⁴³ were seen in not only the break away from the Church of England, but also a cultural shift in the purposes of higher education towards a more liberal-technical ideology: where higher education was still an elite occupation and pure knowledge was valued more highly than applied knowledge, but with the balance shifting towards the latter (Halsey, 1969, p129; Holmes, 2001, p30- 31; Rich, 2001, p49-50). There was increasing emphasis on the

⁴¹ St. Andrews (established 1413); Glasgow (1450), Aberdeen (1494), and Edinburgh (1582).

⁴² In contrast the Napoleonic university was part of the state and staffed by civil servants with the purpose of creating knowledge and providing education to benefit social and economic well-being (Brubacher, 1977, p6; Graham, 2008, p12).

⁴³ Initially these were university colleges with their degrees awarded by the University of London.

advancement of knowledge and the scientific nature of knowledge, rather than knowledge for purely moral purposes (Salter and Tapper, 1994, p10). Nevertheless the ‘secular’ university still had an important role in civilising the student to ensure they were able to contribute to the improvement of society (Briggs, 1969, p 112-113).

Curriculum

In relation to the curricula, the ‘secular’ university does not abandon the curricula of the ‘doctrinal’ university in its entirety, but proportionately greater emphasis is placed on practical subjects both hard and soft. So the teaching of classics and history (singulars) is complemented by the study of subjects which are linked to the local needs of industry within the community (regions) (Briggs, 1969, p98). However, greater emphasis is placed on the outward looking regions, based on the stronger institutional links with what Bernstein (2000, p56) describes as fields of practice. The curriculum is less well insulated from the influence of external bodies.

In the ‘secular’ university professorships in divinity, civil law and rhetoric, seen in the ‘doctrinal’ university, are replaced by ones in agriculture, chemistry, dyeing, metallurgy and textile technology (Whitaker, 1900). The occurrence of such chairs reflected local industrial specialisms (Reeves, 1969, p77).

The mixed nature of the curriculum within the ‘secular’ university means that the management of both singulars and regions, each with their own place in the perceived hierarchy of prestige, is likely to be more challenging and demanding. The emergence of the professional and specialist administrator is necessary to support such demands (Fielden, 1976, p51; Rich, 2001, p56).

Governance

The closer links of the ‘secular’ university with both local industry and the local government in the municipality, meant that the ‘secular’ university was more *‘town and gown’* rather than the *‘ivory tower’* of the ‘doctrinal’ university with greater integration

of the university into the community. Anderson (2006, loc 128 of 4994) suggests, however, that difference is not as stark as often presented, noting that the medieval universities were both '*vocational and utilitarian in character. In terms of governance, such close links historically resulted initially in a powerful lay majority on the universities*' governing councils. Although as a degree of university income came from the Government this was mediated by a more '*democratic*' style of governance (Scott, 1995, p15, p63). Academic senates increasingly directed university business, chaired by the vice-chancellor and made up a greater proportion of academic staff, rather than professoriate, which meant that management was by consensus (Scott, 1995, p63-64).

External influence

Another characteristic of the 'secular' university is an acceptance of greater involvement of outside agencies, particularly from industry and the professions in issues of curriculum content, academic standards and determining excellence. Initially this stemmed from the status of university colleges which, unable to award their own degrees, accepted the University of London (1836) as their examining body (Silver and Silver, 1986, p12). It also stemmed from the requirements of external professional bodies such as the Inns of Court and the General Medical Council, which validated the curriculum delivered by the university.

This external influence, however, is still within the context of respect for the autonomy of universities, albeit having to be defended more overtly as the close relationship between the state and universities begins to fragment. This stems from the Government changing its policy towards higher education, as it realises that state *influence* if not control of higher education is necessary to achieve its developing economic ideology (Salter and Tapper 1994, p11).

Due cognisance has to be taken of a series of external influences which because of the reliance on patronage, funding and validation means that this 'ideal type' of university

is more vulnerable to the changing demands of the external bodies. Not least because such universities lack the significant endowments of the ‘doctrinal’ universities (Holmes, 2001, p31). The ‘secular’ university is not insulated from the Government and industry to the same extent as the ‘doctrinal’ university.

Examples

Historical examples of ‘secular’ universities include the University of Hull whose embryonic college received considerable support from the local authority (Bamford, 1978, p37-39); University of Birmingham (1875) with its strong links with Cadburys; University of Bristol (1876) with its links with Frys and Wills, and the University of Nottingham (with Boots) (Anderson, 2006, loc 1334 of 4994).

2.4.3 The ‘vocational’ university

Knowledge

If the purpose of the ideal ‘doctrinal’ university is represented by the notion of academic freedom, and the ‘secular’ university the respect for local needs, the purpose of the ideal ‘vocational’ university is to meet the economic, political and social needs of society. It is to provide greater skills-based higher education, within a more sophisticated schema of professional education (Minogue, 1973, p53). The emphasis is on teaching and applied research, often securing a stronger financial base for the university (Gledhill, 2001, p95). Opening the opportunities for a broader range of students to enter higher education is an important part of the university’s missions (Gledhill, 2001, p97).

The distinction between the ‘doctrinal’ and ‘vocational’ university is perhaps best summed up by a quotation from Edward Short, Secretary of State for Education and Science on 25th April, 1969:

‘Broad theories about the purpose of the university can be polarised into two extremes. There is what I call the ivory tower theory, where learning is pursued and teaching undertaken in glorious disregard for the world outside..... On the other side, there is the bread and butter

theory where the demands of earning one's living are the only determinants of what is taught or researched.'

Governance

The pattern of internal administration in the 'vocational' university is the key difference in the governance structures from the 'doctrinal' and 'secular' universities. No longer is the university managed solely through the academic senate or senior management positions filled by academic staff on a roll-over basis (Henkel, 2000, p55; Gledhill, 2001, p99). In the 'vocational' university the powerful Executive is led by the Vice-Chancellor (the Chief Executive), and is made up of posts such as Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice Chancellor, and Academic Registrar that are managerial appointments (Scott, 1995, p64, p69; Henkel, 2000, p55). Professionals have replaced the academic amateur. Similarly other elements of the university's administrative function are professionalised, in order to support the executive leadership.

This shift from a collegial form of governance to a more bureaucratic structure, which emphasises the importance of management, rather than decision making through rituals, evolution and private networks, has resulted in a new type of academic, the academic manager. Such a person, while having an established academic reputation, is not usually a professor, and is appointed because they have the bureaucratic skills to undertake managerial tasks, rather than to act as the patriarch to colleagues and such as the head of department (Henkel, 2000, p235-236). Academic influence prevalent in the democratic 'secular' university might, in the 'vocational' university, rely more readily on the influence of the trade unions in keeping with their historical antecedents and the nature of the managerialistic form of governance (Scott, 1995, p66).

In turn this also changes perceptions of excellence. Where the 'doctrinal' model and, to a lesser extent, the 'secular' model equates excellence with the worth of a certain

educational ethos. In the ‘vocational’ university excellence is related to efficiency and effectiveness, and assessed through regulation (Scott, 1995, p66).

Curriculum and external influence

In the ‘vocational’ university the curriculum is dominated by regions and generics (see section 3.1.4) in order to meet the perceived demands of employers and the economy. Academics still hold responsibility for the development of the content and pedagogic discourse in the majority of cases, but this will be influenced by external agencies and demands of the market. The nature of the language within the curriculum will also be different, with greater reference to competencies and skills.

This combination of regions and particularly the inclusion of generics within the curriculum, places the ‘vocational’ institution towards the ‘lower status’ end of the perceived hierarchy of knowledge status with generics focus on competence rather than academic understanding (Bernstein, 2000, p53-55; Ashwin, Abbas and McLean, 2015, p612). Nevertheless, the legitimisation of new subject areas is a key consideration for the ‘vocational’ university; criticism of developing ‘*trivial subjects*’ is common-place (Minogue, 1973, p60). Such legitimisation is often through external confirmation of their intrinsic worth. Equally, demonstrating that academic standards are being maintained is essential and testing by external bodies is passed off as rational, and often welcomed (Filippakou and Tapper, 2010, p485).

Scott (1995, p31) however warns of over simplifying the demarcation between what I have called the ‘secular’ and ‘vocational’ universities in terms of knowledge base. He notes that the key demarcation between these two types of institutions is more administrative than educational in nature, even in the context of the ‘ideal type’.

Examples

The origins of the new 'vocationally' orientated university are mixed. Some have developed from the former Colleges of Advance Technology (CAT)⁴⁴ established from 1956 in response to the universities' reluctance to meet the Government's developing economic ideology (Salter and Tapper, 1994, p14; Scott, 1995, p14). Examples included the Battersea CAT; Birmingham CAT; Bradford Institute of Technology; and Bristol CAT⁴⁵. All of these colleges became universities following the review of the pattern of full-time higher education in Great Britain, the Robbins Review (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, piii). The examples given became the University of Surrey, Aston University, the University of Bradford and the University of Bath respectively.

Other examples of the ideal 'vocational' university are the former polytechnics, for example Liverpool John Moores University, given university status as a result of the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. Others were colleges of higher education, for example, University of Lincoln. The elevation to university status of former teacher training institutions, for example the University of Gloucestershire, has been followed by the 'promotion' of other specialist institutions such as the University for the Creative Arts.

If there are common links amongst this variety of organisations, it is their experience of some form of external intervention in issues of instruction and teaching (Gledhill, 2001, p99) due to the historical antecedents of the 'vocational' university. The experience of the public sector institutions (the polytechnics and colleges of higher education) in

⁴⁴ A number of local technical colleges, 'of high standing' were designated as College of Advanced Technology in 1956 and funded directly by the Ministry of Education (Briggs, 1969, p102).

⁴⁵ Other Colleges of Advance Technology that received university status in the light of the Robbins Report (1963) included: Brunel CAT - Brunel University; University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology (later part of Cardiff University); Chelsea CAT - Chelsea College of Science and Technology (part of the University of London then later subsumed into King's College London); Loughborough CAT - Loughborough University; Northampton CAT (London) - City University London; Salford CAT (the Royal College of Advanced Technology) - University of Salford.

relation to external agencies, such as the local authorities, the National Advisory Board (NAB) and the Council for National Academic Awards⁴⁶ (CNAA) meant that they were well used to their operation being overseen or even directed by those outside the academy/university (Scott, 1995, p81). The role of such agencies is discussed further in the next chapter.

2.4.4 Academic drift

As noted at the beginning of this section, the three ‘ideal types’ described above are theoretical ideal concepts, and all universities in England will have some characteristics from each type of university. For example, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge also conceded some adaptations towards the ‘secular’ university in order to maintain their monopoly over the high status institutions (Halsey, 1969, p134), although the values of the universities remain closer to the ‘doctrinal’ university.

Another reason for this academic drift is the power of the ideology of the traditional university, and its ability to seduce and subvert higher education institutions into aspiring to be the same (Salter and Tapper, 1994, p17; Scott, 1995, p23). Prime examples are the CATs established in 1956 to take forward the State’s higher education agenda for promoting economic growth, these were absorbed into the university sector and remoulded into the image of the traditional universities (Salter and Tapper, 1994, p17).

⁴⁶ The Council for National Academic Awards operated between 1965 and 1992 as the awarding body for degrees delivered at non-university institutions. In this context it had responsibility for the oversight of quality and standards of these awards.

2.5 Summary

This chapter shows the complex position of the QAA in between the sector and the Government based in part on the antecedents of the QAA's predecessor bodies. It also sets the QAA's work in the wider context of the stratified and hierarchical higher education in England, and considers how the empirical challenge of selecting the universities to participate in the research might be overcome.

The three 'ideal types' of universities identified in the chapter, although purely theoretical, provide a means of categorising the universities in England at the time of the research to provide a framework for selecting the three universities to participate in the research.

The 'doctrinal' university is characterised by being a high status, elite university, with a long and distinguished history, staffed and governed by an elite community of scholars. It predominantly offers traditional subject singulars, such as physics and chemistry, where the discipline has very few external reference points and is solely responsible for the production of knowledge (Bernstein, 1996, p23). There are more academic staff undertaking research in the 'doctrinal' university than in either the 'secular' or 'vocational' institutions (McLean, Abbas, and Ashwin, 2013, p270). To this end the 'doctrinal' institution is strongly insulated from external influences and pressures. Responsibility for setting academic standards and for defining the nature of excellence sits exclusively with senior academic staff. The legitimate purpose of the university is a desire for knowledge, based on a concern for excellence that emphasises the innate worth of a purist, non-utilitarian ethos: the institution is inward rather than outward looking.

The 'secular' university, in contrast, is characterised by a broader, more outward looking curriculum with greater emphasis on practical/scientific subjects, and stronger links with industry and commerce. Institutional classification is weaker as a broader

range of external agencies have a legitimate contribution to make to curriculum design, assessment and setting academic standards. The university retains its elite positioning and an emphasis on both knowledge and skills competency. Its outputs, including students, are expected to make a more direct and practical contribution to society.

The 'vocational' institution is characterised by curricula more closely aligned with economic, political and social needs. The subject areas offered are predominantly what Bernstein refers to as 'regions' arising from the recontextualisation of singulars in new subject areas with a greater emphasis on the field of practice (1996, p23). These new subject areas are weakly insulated and subject to external influences. The 'vocational' type is also characterised by institutional governance based on a bureaucratised structure using professional managers, rather than senior academic staff on a roll-over basis traditionally seen in 'doctrinal' institutions. The notion of excellence linked to the 'worth' of a particular educational ethos has been replaced with management and efficiency.

The next chapter will set out the analytical framework for exploring the relationships between the QAA and the universities, and between the QAA and the Government in more detail. It also explores the nature of the mediation process that QAA appears to undertake and how the universities implement the nationally agreed guidance and external assessment methods for assuring academic standards and quality in higher education.

CHAPTER THREE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the analytical framework used in the research, which is based on the work of Basil Bernstein and his concepts of the pedagogic device, its rules and in particular the notion of recontextualisation. I then use the framework to undertake an initial analysis of the QAA, using a series of examples from the Agency's history and more contemporary developments. In doing this I begin to identify the specific areas that the research will explore. These are then crystallised at the end of the chapter into four research questions.

3.1 The Analytical Framework

3.1.1 Rationale for the framework

Basil Bernstein has been described as providing a radically different and insightful way of analysing the hierarchies and divisions of the English education system (Ball, 2001, p41; Muller, 2001, p148). His contribution has been to extend the theories of cultural reproduction by recognising the influence of society within pedagogy, particularly in pre-tertiary education. More specifically he draws on the work primarily of Durkheim, but also Marx and Weber, to provide a systematic analysis of knowledge transmission and communication to show the way in which the educational system is related to the social division of labour (Sadovnik, 2001, p18-19).

Although much of his work is considered highly abstract (Power, 2010, p244), his concept of recontextualisation, where knowledge is selectively appropriated, ideologically transformed, and transferred into a new discourse to be reproduced (Bernstein, 1996, p116), potentially provides a useful means of looking at the relationship between the QAA and the universities. It has the potential to allow me to explore the role of the QAA as a possible mediator in developing and implementing a

system of external quality assurance in UK higher education, as suggested in the previous chapter. The concept should also allow me to identify the location and process by which this mediation takes place and determine if the universities undertake a similar process, and whether the capacity to do so varies between the different types of universities. Finally, the concept should enable me to discuss the autonomy of universities, in relation to external quality assurance, from a more theoretical perspective. As Bernstein notes (1990, p86) the university system is now engaged in an increasing struggle over: *'what should be transmitted, over the autonomy of transmissions, over the conditions of service of those who transmit, and over the procedures of evaluation of acquirers'*. My research looks at the QAA's role in this struggle.

3.1.2 Bernstein and higher education

In relation to higher education, much of the empirical research using Bernstein to date has focussed on pedagogic practice, teaching and learning, curriculum and discipline related issues⁴⁷. Researchers have also used Bernstein's work to look at academic professional identity (Beck and Young, 2005; McNamara, 2008), and the structure of knowledge itself (Maton, 2006). McLean, Abbas and Ashwin in their research project 'Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees' (November 2008-January 2012) used Bernstein's concepts to explore pedagogic quality and social justice issues in the sociology related social science degrees of four universities each with different statuses; and in doing so return to the very essence of Bernstein's 'project' of exploring social injustice (McLean, Abbas and Ashwin, 2013, p264). This project makes specific reference to the QAA as an example of an agent of the Official Recontextualising Field (McLean, Abbas and Ashwin, 2013, p271). Research undertaken by Ashwin, Abbas and

⁴⁷ See for example, Rosie, Bufton and Hirst, 2001; Beck 2002; Breier, 2004; Ensor, 2004; Wheelahan, 2007; Luckett 2009; Shay 2008, 2011; Geirsdóttir, 2011; Sarahinioti, Tstatsaroni, and Stamelos, 2011; Vorster 2011; Penny 2013; Whitcombe 2013; and Donnelly, 2014.

McLean subsequently (2015) considered how high-quality undergraduate education in England was represented in a range of policy documents, and again specific reference was made to the QAA; in this instance how the Agency represent quality in higher education.

Bernstein is not without his critics, particularly of his early work (Apple, 2001, p91; Inglis, 2001, p78; Morais, 2001, p33; Sadovnik, 2001, p12). Even the proponents of Bernstein's work admit that his level of abstraction and complex language make his theories challenging to understand (Danzig, 1995, p166; Holland, 2001, p132) and difficult to apply empirically (Dowling, 2005, p17; Power, 2010, p246). These difficulties, however, helped me to further problematise the professional issue regarding the QAA's relationship with the universities.

3.1.3 Knowledge structures and recontextualisation

Before focussing specifically on the concept of recontextualisation, it is worth briefly setting out the theoretical context for the research.

As noted above, Bernstein was interested in the structures of knowledge and its creation, transmission and acquisition. His conceptualisation of the pedagogic device provides a means of explaining the process by which access to knowledge is stratified (Ashwin, Abbas and McLean, 2012, p119). Many researchers, such as Bonal and Haavelsrud (2001, p330), Rambla (2003, p173) and Singh and Harris (2010, p253-55) discuss the increasing domination of the 'state' in regulating and controlling the pedagogic device and the PRF in pre-tertiary education. The pedagogic device therefore seemed to have the potential to explore the role of the QAA and its relationship with the universities and the Government.

The fields within the pedagogic device are sites where teachers/academics undertake the creation, transmission and acquisition of knowledge: the field of production, the field of recontextualisation, and the field of reproduction respectively (see Figure 3). Bernstein

also suggests that there are a series of rules which regulate these processes/fields (Bernstein, 1990, p180-183, p191-192). Overall, the pedagogic device regulates how knowledge is distributed and to what effect, in terms of pedagogic identity and/or consciousness, and social destiny of the acquirer (Maton and Muller 2007, p19; McLean, Abbas and Ashwin, 2013, p269).

The rules of the pedagogic device allow us to identify which groups in society are determining what is legitimate knowledge and who/what is influencing access to that knowledge store (the **distributive rules**); who is allowed to interpret and repackage that knowledge into curriculum policy, textbooks etc. (the **recontextualising rules**); and who is allowed to determine the academic legitimacy of those who reproduce knowledge by establishing a set of evaluative criteria to be attained (**the evaluative rules**) (see Figure 3 below) (Bernstein, 1996, p43-49; Bernstein, 2000, p28-36; Maton and Muller, 2007, p19). The pedagogic device therefore is both powerful and an ‘arena of struggle’ in which actors strive to control the device for their own means (Bernstein, 1990, p206; Maton, 2004, p219; Ashwin, Abbas, and McLean, 2015, p611).

Process	Field	Activity	Site	PD Rule
Creation	Production of knowledge	Research	Research papers conferences, labs	Distributive
Transmission	Recontextualising	Constructing the Curriculum	Curriculum policy textbooks learning aids	Recontextualising
Acquisition	Reproduction	Teaching	Classrooms examinations	Evaluation

Figure 3 The process and fields of knowledge and the relevant rules of the pedagogic device (adapted from Bernstein, 1996, p52 and Maton and Muller, 2007, p18).

The rules are not ideologically free and are influenced by culture, context, classification and framing systems (Bernstein, 1996, p42). Therefore there are different pedagogic devices depending on socio-economic, historical, cultural and policy circumstances (McLean, Abbas and Ashwin, 2013, p269). The rules are also hierarchical with the distribution rules setting the limit on what counts as knowledge and therefore what is available to be recontextualised into the curriculum, which in turn limits the pedagogic texts that can be produced through the evaluation rules (Bernstein, 2000, p28; Ashwin, Abbas, and McLean, 2012, p119).

In the context of this research and the QAA's responsibilities in relation to the quality assurance of teaching and learning, the recontextualisation process and its rules and the degree to which the QAA influences them are the most pertinent.

In higher education, the **distributive rules** are influenced at the macro level by the research councils (Henkel, 2000, p112) and the higher education funding bodies through the external quality assurance of academic research⁴⁸. The distributive rules also determine who has access to the knowledge created, both in terms of teaching and learning (Ashwin, 2009, p91-93). While this largely remains the decision of the academy, it too is increasingly being influenced by government initiatives, such as opening the sector to alternative providers, and other widening participation activities (McLean and Abbas, 2010, p6). As discussed later in the chapter, the QAA subject benchmark statements might be considered as determining what is 'valid knowledge' and the QAA's recognition scheme for subject benchmark statements determines

⁴⁸ The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and subsequently the Research Excellence Framework (REF) are the mechanisms by which the funding bodies through teams of academic peers assess the quality of research submissions in order to allocate funds. The RAE was established in 1985 by the Universities Grants Committee, and conducted firstly by UGC/Universities Funding Council and then managed by HEFCE on behalf of the other funding bodies from 1992 onwards (Henkel, 2000, p113; Morley, 2004, p23). The RAE took place in 1986, 1992, 1996, 2001, 2008. The first REF was took place in 2014 (HEFCE, 2011).

‘whether or not it is appropriate for the QAA to support the development of a new benchmark statement’ (QAA, 2012c, p1) (see section 5.2.3).

The **evaluative rules** determine what is being taught, how it is being taught and what counts as the valid acquisition of the curriculum (Singh, 2002, p573) and are heavily influenced by the subject networks (Ashwin, 2009, p103). They are also linked to the concepts of acceptable social conduct, character and manner (Singh, 2002, p573) and more generally, institutional culture.

The **recontextualising rules** control the means by which a discourse is moved from where it was produced (the field of production) to a new site where it is altered (re-located, re-focused) as it is pedagogised (taught/shared) and related to other discourses (Singh, 2002, p573; Ashwin, 2009, p93-94). Bernstein (1996, p48, p117-118; 2000, p33) suggests that this recontextualisation can take place in two places: the **official recontextualising field** (ORF), created and dominated by the State, government departments and selected agents; and the **pedagogic recontextualising field** (PRF). The relationship between these two fields is shown in Figure 4 below in the context of secondary education. It is worth noting the linear direction of the recontextualising process from ORF to PRF. This is not necessarily the case in relation to higher education (see section 3.3).

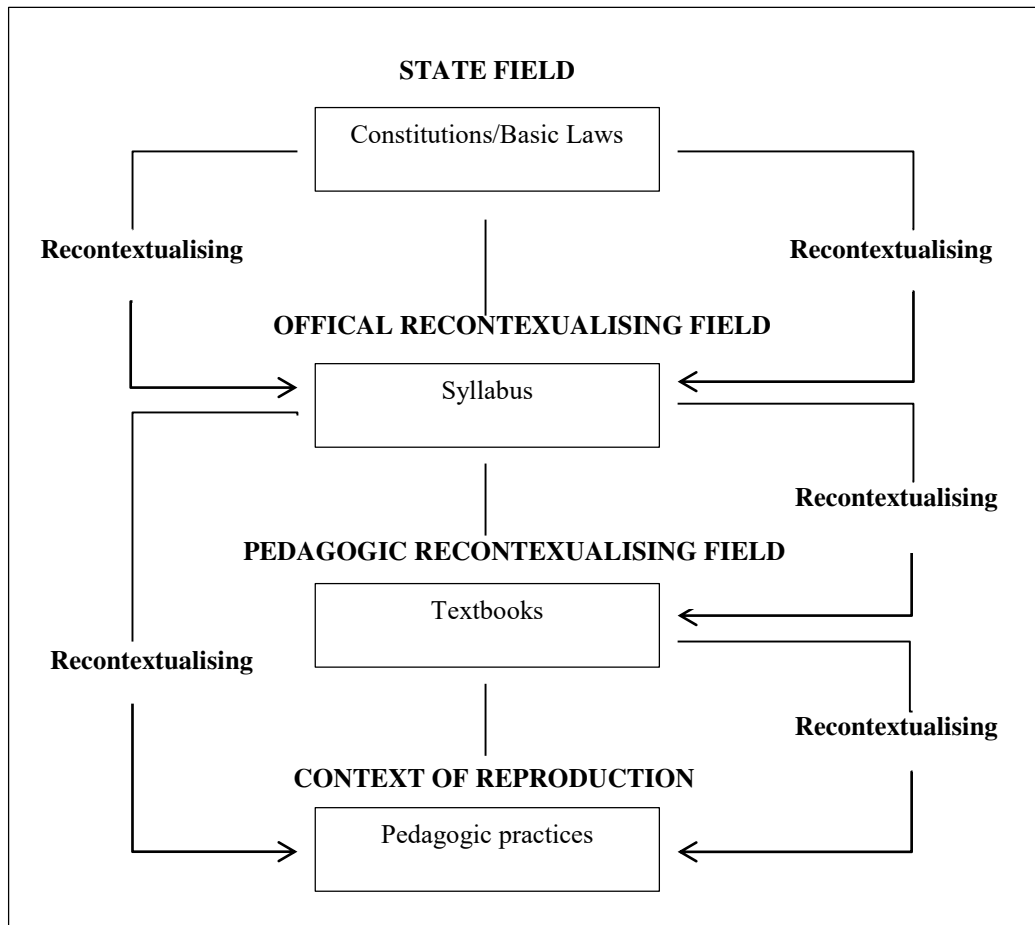


Figure 4 *Recontextualisation of pedagogic discourse at various levels of the pre-tertiary education (adapted from Morais and Neves, 2010, p28)*

In higher education the PRF includes academic departments, discipline communities, research centres, academic journals, and professional organisations (Bernstein, 2000, p33). The PRF has a series of agents, for example the representative bodies of the higher education institutions such as Universities UK, GuildHE, and the common interest (mission) groups such as the Russell Group; the 1994 Group⁴⁹, the Million+, the University Alliance, the Mixed Economy Group, and the Independent Universities Group⁵⁰. These groups promote members' common interests, respond to key policy issues, and share best practice (Filippakou and Tapper, 2015, p2). Universities UK and

⁴⁹ The 1994 Group terminated in 2013 (Filippakou and Tapper, 2015, p13).

⁵⁰ Established in 2015, the Independent Universities Group represents eight institutions with degree-awarding powers and/or university title that are not funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

GuildHE advise and lobby government and the higher education funding bodies; they act on behalf of their members in issuing formal responses to government policy, and undertake research/consultations on arrangements for quality assurance, often conducted in collaboration with the funding bodies.

In principle, there is no ORF for the construction of the official higher education discourse (Bernstein 2000, p60). There is no national curriculum and higher education institutions remain autonomous, independent bodies responsible for setting their own academic standards (Bernstein, 1996, p74; Brown, 2004, p10). However, Bernstein (1996, p48) suggests that the Government is trying to weaken the PRF to reduce the autonomy of universities through a number of policy initiatives and agents, such as the higher education Funding Councils and the research councils (Bernstein, 2000, p60). McLean, Abbas and Ashwin (2013, p271) suggest that the QAA and other professional statutory regulatory bodies are also such agents.

This is important because as Bernstein (2000, p33) notes, academic autonomy exists where the PRF has an effect over the pedagogic discourse independently of the ORF. Where this is directed or influenced by the ORF, autonomy is diluted; for example Bernstein considers the research assessment exercises to be one form of such dilution (Bernstein, 2000, p60). Trowler (2012, p27) suggests that academic autonomy has been weakened at discipline level by the displacement of the decision making process away from the academy as governance structures change and I have already suggested that the QAA's subject benchmark statements might have played a role in that. It will be interesting to explore in the empirical data the degree to which the QAA guidance and review methods have also contributed to this.

Bernstein (2000, p60) also suggests that each higher education provider will have its own recontextualising field and these will hold a range of ideological positions and be in competition with each other. Singh (2002, p577) notes there can be significant

contestation within the PRF itself. For example between strongly insulated disciplines, or between the different representative and common interest (mission) groups. The result is that although academics might be described as a community of scholars, responsible for safeguarding the quality and standards of the pedagogic device (Becher, 1989, p170; Trowler, 2012, p11; McGettigan, 2013, p150), the contested PRF means that the academic community does not speak with one voice and remains politically weaker than it might potentially be otherwise (Trow, 2005, p8; Becher, 1989, p170-171).

Although Bernstein identifies that there might be a number of recontextualising fields within a university, his concept of the PRF is used as if it is one homogeneous grouping, albeit with a suggestion of this being demarcated along discipline lines. In the context of quality assurance of universities I want to suggest that there might be two different types of PRF; an Academic-PRF (A-PRF) which is akin to Bernstein's original concept, and a Central-PRF (C-PRF) which comprises the quality professionals and institutional level quality assurance committees. Therefore I want to suggest that there are two sites of recontextualisation in a university (see section 7.3).

3.1.4 Singulars, regions and generics

In Chapter two I identified three 'ideal types' of universities. Part of the description of each type includes reference to the nature of the institution's curriculum. It is helpful here to draw on Bernstein's (1996, p65) notion of **singulars**, **regions** and **generics** as a means of explaining their characteristics, that is their nature, role in the production, recontextualisation and reproduction of knowledge and their insulation to external influences.

Singulars are knowledge structures whose creators control the site of knowledge production to establish a unique, specialist and discrete discourse with its own texts,

practices, rules, rewards and punishments. Such disciplines are strongly bounded, hierarchical, narcissistic and able to determine what is legitimate discourse (Bernstein, 1996, p46). There is an 'inwardness' leading to strong subject identity and loyalty (Beck and Young, 2005, p185; Geirsdóttir, 2010, p96-97). Examples include physics, chemistry, history, economics, theology and English. Although as Beck and Young (2005, p189) note, singulars have become increasingly fragmented and their insulation from the market and the new managerialism in universities is weakening.

Regions result from a recontextualisation and amalgamation of singulars into larger units. Examples of regions include engineering, medicine, and architecture. Characteristically regions, particularly the newer subject areas, are more diffuse in their knowledge base and are required to have a greater cognisance with the outside world and a weaker insulation from external influences. In this context they are more vulnerable to the impact of new managerialism, market demand, government policy, and external intervention, particularly where this is a means of legitimising the region. Examples of regions also include anthropology, art and design, management, media studies, and tourism.

Generics relate to the introduction of generic 'vocational' skills which reflect the needs of employers and the world of work. Initially generics occurred predominantly in further education (Bernstein, 2000, p53); however, over the last two decades aspects of the generic mode have entered higher education with the increased emphasis on non-discipline based transferable skills in the undergraduate, postgraduate and even doctoral curriculum (Beck and Young, 2005, p190). This introduction is producing an outcomes based model of curriculum, rather than one which is reflective, collective, developmental and process-oriented. The focus is on the development of skills, where teaching itself is considered to be a set of skills (Barnett and Coate, 2005, p18).

3.2 Applying Bernstein to the QAA: An Initial Analysis

In Chapter two, I have already noted the influence of the higher education sector, the Funding Councils and the Government in establishing the Agency. To demonstrate how such influences continued as the QAA evolved, a number of examples in relation to the Agency's review methods, guidance materials, structures and relationship with the HEFCE, merit analysis.

3.2.1 The end of subject level review

Perhaps the most well-known example of the sector's (PRF's) influence on the work of the QAA is in relation to the demise of subject level review in 2001. When the QAA was established, the external quality assurance system reviewed at both institutional and subject level. CVCP and the higher education sector requested the QAA to undertake institutional level audit on their behalf. The process, called Continuation Audit, which ran from 1999 to 2001, was based largely on those used by the AAU and HEQC. Its purpose was to establish the extent to which institutions were discharging effectively their responsibilities for the standards of the awards they granted, and for the quality of education provided to enable students to attain those standards (QAA, 1999, p1). Audit teams came to conclusions in relation to:

'the level of confidence which an informed observer might reasonably place in the effectiveness of the processes and procedures used by an institution in the discharge of its responsibility for establishing and maintaining its academic quality and standards.'

(QAA, 1999, p7)

As can be seen from the quotation above, audit teams were not making direct judgements on institutional academic standards or quality, but rather on processes and procedures undertaken by the university itself. This focus on process is an important distinction from subject level review.

At the same time the HEFCE contracted the QAA to undertake reviews at subject level, initially continuing Teaching Quality Assessment but on a universal rather than sampling scale. The reviews evaluated the quality of educational provision within a subject area and were undertaken by subject specialist peer review teams selected by the QAA. The review focussed on the quality of the student learning experience and student achievement (QAA, 1997, p7). An overall summative judgement about the quality of the education was made based on the grading of six aspects: curriculum design, content and organisation; teaching, learning and assessment; student progression and achievement; student support and guidance; learning resources; and quality management and enhancement. In Bernstein's terms the QAA, albeit using academic peers, was assessing pedagogic practice and exerting control over the recontextualising and the evaluative rules of the pedagogic device.

There is no doubt that this extension of the Teaching Quality Assessment from a sampling to an universal approach and the subsequent development of the Subject Review method (see section 2.2), placed significant demands on the universities, and continued to challenge the status of the PRF, who increasingly felt disempowered and disenfranchised (Williams, 2009, p11; Newton 2002, p42). Morley (2003, p17) describes it as a *'highly corrosive form of performance and regulation'*. Challenges to the outcomes of the reviews were frequent and in a number of instances disciplines within universities refused to participate, such as the economists at the University of Warwick (Filippakou and Tapper, 2010, p485). However, subject review was not disliked by all academics. For some subjects it provided them with a stronger voice within the university, because a QAA review brought them into the spotlight and disrupted the pecking order within the disciplines in the university (Newton, 2002, p50-51). For some institutions, particularly those akin to the 'vocational ideal type' of

university, it provided the opportunity to gain legitimacy for their disciplines (Morley, 2003, p125).

After seven years of subject level review by the HEFCE and then the QAA, the outcomes of which had been predominantly positive, a group of elite universities lobbied the Government successfully for their end (Morley, 2004, p17). On 21 March 2001 the Secretary of State for Education and Skills announced cessation of Subject Review and a reduction in burden for those universities that had performed well in the reviews.

While the end of subject level review is seen as a coup for the PRF, Brown (2004, p131), Williams (2009, p19) and Filippakou, Salter, and Tapper (2010, p550) suggest that there were other broader policy and economic developments which influenced the Government's decision. A perceived lack of value for money was seen to be a key driver. This would suggest that the ORF was acting in its own interests as well as responding to the demands of the PRF.

Williams (2009, p19) suggests that the Government's statement also gave the HEFCE and the representative bodies the justification to revisit the whole quality assurance framework and this *'effectively spelled the end of QAA's autonomy.'* It placed in question the authority of the Agency, something that would happen again after the publication of the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills (IUSS) Select Committee's report following its review of the Student and Universities in 2009 (see later and section 3.2.2). Both of these are prime examples of contestation occurring between the agents and within the ORF itself; suggesting that the QAA operates within a complex matrix of relationships.

What emerged from the subsequent discussion, negotiations and consultation, led by the HEFCE and the representative bodies, was a review method that focussed primarily on institutional level review with a small element of subject review (Brown, 2004, p131).

The PRF had secured a review method that was much closer to the one used by HEQC (the sector's own method). The universities and the QAA however, were not going to get their way regarding the proposed 'lighter touch' audit method. The Minister for Higher Education intervened at the last minute to retain an element of regulation at subject level through discipline audit trails⁵¹ (Morley, 2004, p18), and a shorter three year review cycle (Williams, 2009, p20). This provides another example of the ORF overriding the QAA and the PRF to retain control over the PRF and is in keeping with the Government's approach to public policy reform and the distrust of professional regulation.

Institutional Audit (transitional arrangements) operated between 2003 and 2005 and it was not until the development of Institutional Audit (2006-2009) that review at subject level finally ended. The driver for this removal came from the recommendation of the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group's (QAFRG) report into the first phase of the evaluation of the Quality Assurance Framework (HEFCE, 2005a, p3)⁵² ⁵³. The evaluation of the Framework was sponsored jointly by the HEFCE, UUK and SCOP and relied heavily on evidence produced by JM Consulting⁵⁴ (2005) in its report to the QAFRG, HEFCE, representative bodies and the Government on the effectiveness, impact and costs of the Quality Assurance Framework. In Bernstein's terms this is another example of the agents of the PRF working with the agents of the ORF to develop/modify the quality assurance system. What is difficult to determine at this stage

⁵¹ Discipline audit trails looked at 10 per cent of the institutions provision to assess how institutional processes and procedures for assuring academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities work in practice.

⁵² The purpose of the QAFRG was to consider the impacts, benefits and costs of the Quality Assurance Framework to which QAA worked and of which institutional audit was one element. (HEFCE, 2005a, p20).

⁵³ The QAFRG's membership consisted: 5 heads of institutions, 2 senior academics, 1 representative from the NUS, 1 from HEFCE, 1 from a Professional statutory regulatory body. Observers from DfES, DELNI, QAA.

⁵⁴ JM Consulting is a private organisational development consultancy established in 2003, and commissioned by HEFCE to conduct the review. The report was published by HEFCE.

of the thesis is whether the PRF consider the representative bodies, as their agents, to be cooperating with the ORF, or protecting the interests of the PRF.

The Institutional Audit process was revised once more, after consultation by the QAA with the sector and the HEFCE, but changes were minor. It operated between 2009 and 2011.

The period of Institutional Audit (2006-2011) was fairly stable and resistance to the QAA reviews lessened as the PRF retook control of quality assurance at subject level and the QAA's work became a more naturalised part of higher education (Filippakou, 2011, p22). No longer did universities such as Oxford, Cambridge or the London School of Economics refuse to participate in Institutional Audit. By the end of 2011 only a very few universities did not have at least one senior member of academic or administrative staff who were members of the QAA's review teams.

3.2.2 Changing scope, tone and language – guidance and reviews

An example of the ORF influencing the QAA's work, I suggest, can be seen in difference in the scope, tone and language used in the Academic Infrastructure compared to its successor, the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). Both guidance documents are described as the nationally agreed sets of reference points and were developed with input from the sector under the QAA's stewardship (QAA, 2010, p14).

The documents were designed to provide all institutions with a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the quality and academic standards of their higher education provision; as well as providing the QAA review teams with key reference points in coming to conclusions in the external review methods (QAA, 2009a, 2011b, p3).

Change of scope/focus

In 2009/10 the QAA conducted an evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure in order to determine if it remained fit for purpose (QAA, 2010, p2). In principle the Quality Code retained many of the features of the Academic Infrastructure; however there were some significant changes to its scope and tone. The changes reflected the concerns at the time about the standard of teaching and learning in higher education, and the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills (IUSS) Select Committee's damning report about standards in UK higher education. While the Government's response to the Select Committee's report supported the QAA, it also demanded a new system of quality assurance which was *'more public facing and responsive to the needs of students, and sufficiently flexible that it can respond to the changing modes and models of higher education'* (DBIS, 2010, p71) (see section 3.2.2). Consequently the Quality Code includes two new chapters on *'Student Engagement'*⁵⁵ and *'Information about higher education'*⁵⁶. The increased emphasis on the student is also evident in the overarching values of the Quality Code, the first three of which relate directly to the student⁵⁷.

Applying the analytical framework to these events highlights the complex nature of the ORF, and the relationship between the House of Commons and government ministers/departments. In this instance, the Government supported its agent (the QAA), but revised the remit under which it must operate, aligning it even more closely to government policy for the further marketisation of higher education provision in England. The Government did not acquiesce to the Select Committee's request for

⁵⁵ Chapter B5 focusses on the provision of an inclusive environment which enables students to engage in learning, to learn independently, and participate in quality assurance and enhancement activities (QAA, 2012a, p2).

⁵⁶ Part C - describes how higher education providers make information available to students and the wider public that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy (QAA, 2012b, p2)

⁵⁷ Every student is treated fairly and with dignity, courtesy and respect; every student has the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of their learning experience; every student is properly and actively informed at appropriate times of matters relevant to their programmes of study.

greater control over and more direct regulation of teaching and learning in higher education providers.

Change of tone/language

There is also a change in the tone of language used in the Quality Code, compared to that used in the Academic Infrastructure. I suggest this reflects the need for the Agency to appear to be taking a “tougher” stance towards higher education providers, in order to appease the ORF. For example, while the Quality Code recognises the autonomous nature of higher education institutions and states that there is scope for interpretation in how the individual institutions apply the Code, narrow compliance is not expected (QAA, 2011b, p7). The references to ‘*expectations*’⁵⁸ rather than ‘*precepts*’⁵⁹ and to institutions being ‘*required to meet the expectations*’ rather than to ‘*engage*’ with the precepts themselves (QAA, 2011b, p9) are much more regulatory in tone. Such differences might seem pedantic, but I suggest they mark a shift in the Agency’s stance (changing the ‘face’ it presents to the universities) away from its position as a mediator (buffer) between the ORF and the PRF. Such a shift might be a pragmatic one, supported by the higher education sector representative bodies (the agents of the PRF) in order to safeguard the sector’s reputation in the light of the market being opened to new entrants (see later). Nevertheless, there is an increased emphasis on compliance, even in the guise of ‘*expectations*’ and ‘*requirements*’, and this is likely to limit the degree of recontextualisation that some higher education providers will be willing to undertake. Some will invariably take a more risk-averse approach. Others will interpret this as an increase in the ORF trying to control the pedagogic device and therefore see the Quality Code as reducing the autonomy of the PRF.

⁵⁸ Expectations express **key principles** that the higher education community has identified as **essential** for the assurance of academic standards and quality. They make clear what HE providers are **required to do** (QAA, 2012a, p4).

⁵⁹ Precepts express **key matters of principle** that the HE community has identified as **important** for areas covered in the Code (QAA, 2004, p1).

External review methods: IRENI and HER

The significance of the changes of tone in the Quality Code is highlighted further when the link between the Quality Code and institutional review methods is considered. In relation to Institutional Audit (2003-2011), the Academic Infrastructure and more specifically the Code of Practice was seen as a useful tool for audit teams to assess the extent to which institutions had **taken account** of the Code and its precepts in managing their academic standards and quality of learning opportunities. By the time of Institutional Review for England and Northern Ireland (IRENI) (2011/12 to 2012/13) and subsequently Higher Education Review (HER) (2013/14 onwards), the Quality Code is the reference point against which providers are judged as to whether they have **met the UK expectations** in relation to threshold academic standards, the quality of student learning opportunities, the enhancement of those opportunities and the information provided about those learning institutions.

This much closer alignment between the Quality Code and the institutional review methods – ‘meeting expectations’ rather than ‘taking account of’ is a significant change and despite assurance from the QAA to the contrary, has engendered visions of the Agency taking a much more tick box approach to the review of higher education providers. Again this will, I suggest, limit the degree of recontextualising that some higher education providers will do in translating the Quality Code into institutional practice (Raban and Cairns, 2014, p115). The change in the structure of the review reports in HER, where the reports are written against each of the expectations in the Quality Code, rather than the more descriptive text against a set of headings seen in Institutional Audit, reiterates this change of stance.

I realise that the events above only began to emerge towards the end of the data collection period, and I have discussed things that have happened after the data

collection period ended. But I thought it important to set out the wider context so that the results of the data analysis might be more current.

Applying the analytical framework to the events above, it would suggest that the PRF, or at the very least its agents have cooperated with the ORF in producing this ‘tougher’ quality assurance system. It is worth noting that in developing the Quality Code, a steering group was established which included membership from the universities and other higher education providers. The Code was also consulted on and signed off by the QAA’s sponsoring bodies who are agents of the PRF, as well as the HEFCE. What this research does not explore is the nature of this consultation process, but this can be found in Bohrer (2015) in her professional doctorate thesis.

I suggest that in return for this cooperation, the universities got a more risk-based review method in HER that should reduce the degree of external review for ‘*providers with a strong track record in managing quality and standards*’ (QAA, 2014, p1). This was certainly what was being demanded by the Russell Group at the time HER was in development (Russell Group 2014). This would suggest that again the ‘doctrinal ideal type’ of universities, as with the demise of subject level review, can lobby government(s) effectively.

3.2.3 A changing gaze

Students have always been an important consideration in the work of the QAA. For example the student written submission has been central to all the QAA’s external review methods since 2002. After 2009, however, the role of students in the QAA’s work has gained increasing prominence. As noted earlier in the thesis a number of factors have contributed to this, including: the new managerialism ideology and the changes to funding so that the students contribute a greater proportion to the cost of their tuition costs; students have been recast as *consumers* of higher education, rather

than the *apprentices* of the sacred knowledge within the disciplines (Barnett and Coate, 2005, p37; Brown, 2013, p400). In these contexts, the Government sees students as partners within the sector, with their own rights and responsibilities, requiring value for money for their investment (tuition fees) and good service (Craft, 1992, p1; DBIS, 2009, p17, p70). Successive White Papers and policy documents from both sides of the House of Commons have reiterated the Government's commitment to students. The implications for the QAA are clear. It has been expected to be more responsive to the needs of students, to focus more on the student experience and the service delivered to students including more student involvement in the audit process and a more effective complaints and appeals systems at institutional levels; provide better and more information for the public about how quality and standards are maintained; and a more proactive role in ensuring that complaints about standards are properly dealt with (DBIS, 2010, p77; DBIS 2011, p36-37).

Given this renewed focus on students, it is not surprising that the new Chief Executive of the QAA, who took up post in October 2009 had significant experience in providing services to students in ways that promoted informed decision making for students in his roles as deputy and then Chief Executive of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. His continued commitment to students was evident at the time of his appointment:

'I feel privileged to be asked to lead QAA at this time of significant challenge for UK higher education and the wider society which it serves. There is an increasing need to engage with students and to assure the public that academic standards are being maintained and enhanced.'

(QAA, 2009c)

Within a very short time of taking up his post in October 2009, the QAA had amended the status of the student representative on the QAA's Board from observer to full

member⁶⁰, appointed by the Board itself in 2009; appointed a student engagement officer; established closer working relationships with the National Union of Students; commissioned students to write specialist guidance for other students about the QAA's work; and begun to communicate with students (and the wider public) using a broader range of channels, including various social media. Over the period of this research a Student Engagement team was established and expanded; a Student Sounding Board (now the Student Advisory Board) (QAA, 2014c) was set up in 2009 as a consultative forum to share best practice to input into the QAA's work. This Board now has a more formal role within the QAA to advise on issues relating to students; meetings are attended by the Chief Executive and other members of the QAA Board (QAA, 2014b).

In 2011, the Agency introduced a student member on to Institutional Audit teams in England⁶¹, initially on a voluntary basis and then as standard from the beginning of the IRENI review method in 2011/12, and continues in the current HER method. The role of student in review teams raises an interesting question about what is a "*peer*" in the context of external institutional review. Raban and Cairns (2014, p114) suggests that the QAA is extending its definition and principles of peer review rather too far. In the context of this research, the question is whether including students on review teams changes the nature of the PRF, given that students are evaluating the university against the UK Quality Code and making a judgement about the academic standards and quality of the provider? I return briefly to this question in the concluding chapter.

It appears from the description above that the QAA is willing to take forward the ORF's agenda in relation to students and the further marketisation of the higher education sector in England. It will be interesting to see how the respondents in the universities

⁶⁰ The student representative is nominated by the National Union of Students and subject to approved by the Board.

⁶¹ Student reviewers have been used in QAA's Enhancement Led Institutional Review process in Scotland since September 2003. They were introduced to Institutional Review team in Wales in January 2010.

view the QAA's role in this, and whether all of the QAA are happy to take forward this quite radical change in focus for the Agency. I use the term radical because up until 2009 I would suggest that the primary focus of the Agency in England, and certainly its communication, was the higher education providers.

3.2.4 The relationship with the HEFCE

The period of 2002-2008 was relatively peaceful for the QAA (Williams, 2009, p21) with little significant scrutiny of the Agency from the Government, other than the scheduled reviews of aspects of its work. It was business as usual. As I noted in Chapter one, however, a series of uncoordinated events in the summer of 2008, some querying the academic standards of UK higher education, others focussing on the analysis of the recommendations in the QAA's Outcomes Reports published at the same time, were seized on by the media (Williams, 2009, p24). These events resulted in intense media and political interest and marked the end of the HEFCE's more hands-off relationship with the QAA.

Shortly after, the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills (IUSS) Select Committee undertook a review: *'Students and Universities'*. The review was wide-ranging including views from the sector and comparative international visits. The subsequent report was damning about the QAA, stating that the system in England for safeguarding consistent national standards in higher education institutions was out of date, inadequate, focussed too much on processes rather than academic standards, and was in urgent need of replacement (House of Commons, 2009a, p5). It also argued that the QAA should be transformed into an independent Quality and Standards Agency with a remit, statutory if necessary, to safeguard, monitor and report on standards (House of Commons, 2009a, p5). It should focus on the comparability of standards between institutions (House of Commons, 2009a, p92).

The Government rejected much of the report and its recommendations, noting 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.'

(House of Commons, 2009b, p6)

It also noted that both the QAA's own thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education and the investigations by the HEFCE's Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience Committee (TQSESC) in response to the Select Committee's review *'found no evidence of a systemic failure in quality in English higher education'* (DBIS, 2010, p71), although it did recognise that there were some areas that would benefit from further work. Critically, the Government supported the work of the Agency, but made clear that reforms were needed so that it more closely met the needs of the market:

'the Government's views about the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) have been made clear – that it does a good job but needs to take on a more public-facing role and one which allows any concerns about quality or standards to be investigated quickly, transparently and robustly.'

(House of Commons, 2009b, p28)

In the end the QAA survived the summer of 2008, but its relationship with the HEFCE and to some extent the representative bodies had changed. The Agency's work would be more closely directed by the ORF and the representative bodies of the PRF.

'For different reasons, both HEFCE and the representative bodies seem to want to keep QAA in its box, letting it out only when they need it to do something particular for them.'

(Williams, 2009, p21).

This was the feeling that also permeated through the Agency at the time.

This more hands-on approach by the HEFCE is understandable. It has the statutory responsibility to assess the quality of education provided by the institutions that it funds (HMSO, 1992, p53; Morley, 2004, p15). During the time of the IUSS Select Committee's review, the HEFCE appeared to receive a dressing down from the Government, and subsequently, and understandably, had to demonstrate its control over England's quality assurance arrangements (Williams, 2009, p21). There was a notable change in how it treated and spoke of the QAA. For example, the Agency was initially excluded from some/part of the meetings of the TQSESC by the HEFCE (former QAA colleague, 2009, personal communication). The QAA has also been consistently referred to by the HEFCE as having an advisory role, with the HEFCE taking the lead on activities which would have previously been given to the QAA to co-ordinate, including some developmental and consultation activities. Brown (2013, p431) notes, for example, that the definitive statement published by the HEFCE about the post-2011 quality assurance regime, on behalf of itself and the representative bodies, was described as being made '*with the advice and guidance of the QAA*'. The HEFCE is also taking responsibility for developing the criteria for the revised risk-based approach to external institutional review. In Bernstein's terms I suggest that this will result in the QAA's scope for recontextualisation in implementing government policy being reduced. What is not so evident is the degree to which this will mean that the HEFCE is recontextualising the Government's policy initiatives/directive. Is there going to be an enhanced but exclusive recontextualisation site, involving the HEFCE as an agent of the ORF, and the representative bodies of the higher education sector as agents of the PRF?

The QAA's revised position was sealed when the Government formally designated the HEFCE as the '*lead regulator*' for quality assurance in the White Paper of June 2011. I have already commented in this chapter about the notion of contestation within the ORF; the events above suggests a pecking order that exists between the agents of the

ORF which is obviously determined by statutory responsibilities and responsibility for contractual agreements.

Although outside the data collection period of this research, recent developments in relation to the QAA merit some comment. In October 2014 the HEFCE, HEFCW and DELI announced a joint review of the existing quality assessment arrangements for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (HEFCE, 2015b, p1). Following the review, the Funding Councils will invite tenders for developing and delivering the new assessment arrangements (HEFCE, 2014). The review is seen as an opportunity to:

‘step back and ask some important questions of higher education providers, of students, of employers, and of other stakeholders in the higher education system, about what quality assessment arrangements should be like in the future.’

(HEFCE, 2015b, p1)

The review is being led by the Quality Assessment Review Steering Group chaired by the Vice-Chancellor of Loughborough University with membership from the higher education sector’s representative bodies, sector representatives from each country, the NUS, students, Association of Heads of University Administration, and the three funding bodies, with the HEFCE having a majority. It is not clear from the documentation if the QAA has observer status on the Steering Group. Personal communication from a former QAA colleague (2015) suggests that the HEFCE has kept the QAA at arms-length during the review.

For the first time in the QAA’s 18 year history the Agency might have to tender for its contract to the Funding Councils to undertake external review. While this now conforms to good governance and procurement practice, it does reiterate the QAA’s position as an agent not just of the ORF, but an agent of an agent of the ORF.

It is also interesting to note that UUK published its own vision for external quality assurance in the future in February 2015. The document, *‘Quality, equity, sustainability:*

the future of higher education regulation’ outlines its proposals to tackle the challenges of quality assurance in the context of students being the primary funders of undergraduate education in England, the weakening of the traditional link between quality assurance and public funding, and the increasing number of higher education providers with diverse corporate status and governance (UUK, 2015, p2). Although not entirely explicit, the report warns of trying to regulate such diversity of providers within a common review framework which the HEFCE and the Government have been trying to establish. UUK perceive it as important to take into consideration ‘*circumstance or history*’ of institutions in reviewing them (UUK, 2015, p2). I would suggest that such a publication is evidence of the universities within the PRF acting in accordance with the status as autonomous institutions with the right to award their own degrees and set their own academic standards. I suggest that the report is a “public” means of influencing the ORF, but this in itself is interesting, given the prominent role the representative bodies have played in sponsoring the QAA’s work to date. Some interesting further work would be to explore in more detail the relationship between these bodies and the QAA, and between UUK and GuildHE and the PRF to determine the boundaries between the PRF and ORF.

3.3 Research Questions

Ritchie and McNaughton Nicholls (2014, p50) suggest that the research questions should be ‘*relevant and useful, whether to policy, practice or the development of social theory, [and] informed by and connected to existing research, theory and need, with the potential to make an original contribution, or to fill a gap.*’ From the initial analysis of the QAA’s activity outlined above, and with reference to the relevant literature set out in Chapter two and my own personal experiences of working at the QAA, I have begun to unpack the professional issue of why the Agency is depicted so variously. It would appear that the Agency’s relationship with the PRF and ORF is complex. It also appears

that, as suggested in Chapter one, the QAA performs some form of recontextualising role, but that this too is complex. It appears not to be in the linear direction as seen in Figure 4 above, but rather a multi-directional process which is also liable to change, as depicted in Figure 5 below. It will be interesting to see if the analysis of the data substantiates the accuracy of Figure 5. The model will be discussed in more detail in Chapter seven.

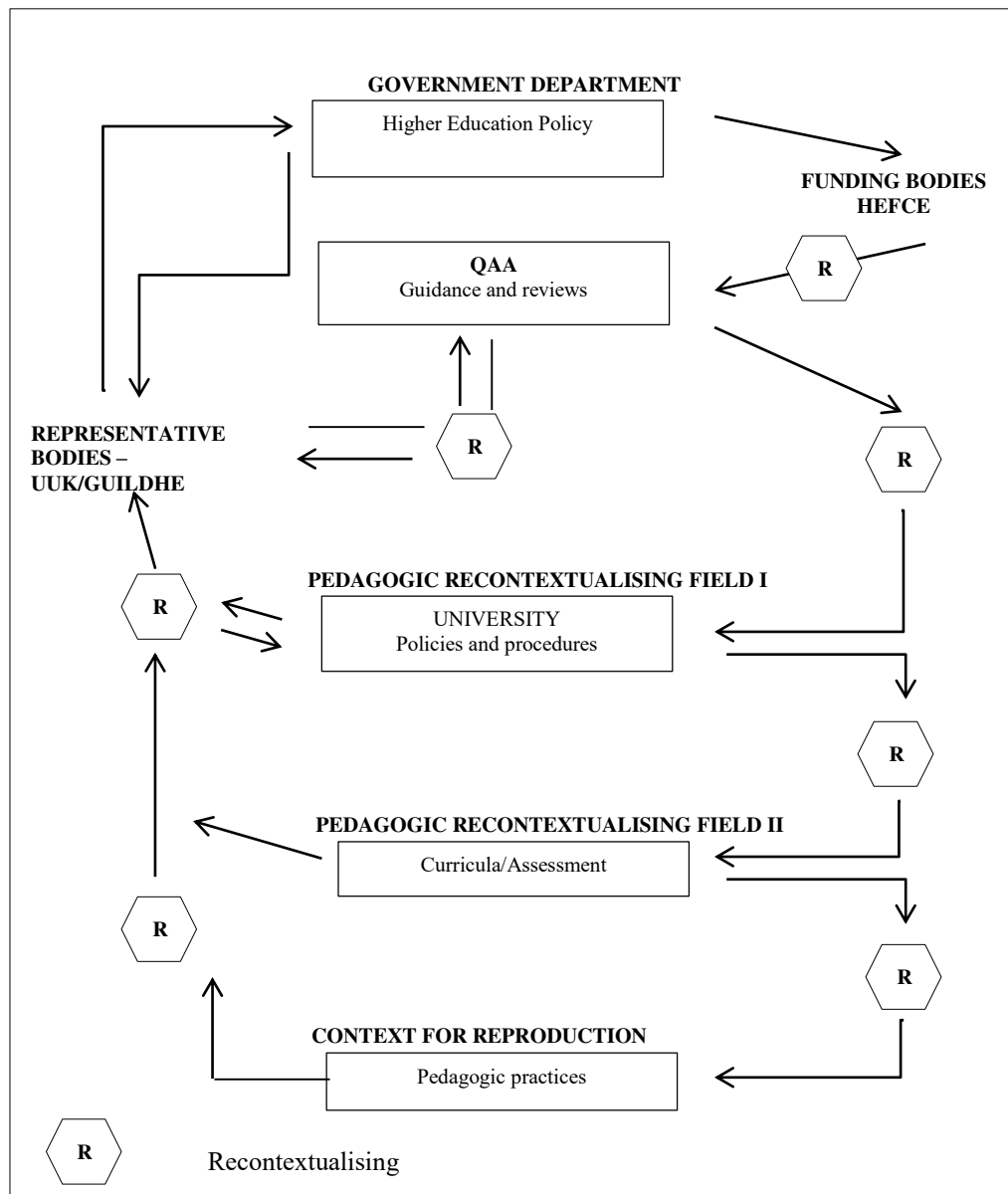


Figure 5 Possible sites of recontextualisation in the external quality assurance of higher education in England (adapted from Morais and Neves, 2010, p28)

Translating these initial thoughts into the research questions was an iterative process. It was important to ensure coherence between the questions and the professional issue (Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls, 2014, p50). The four research questions were:

1. how is the role of the QAA understood across and within universities?
2. what is the nature of the recontextualising process undertaken by the QAA?
3. what is the capacity of different universities to recontextualise what the QAA is saying?
4. how much influence does the QAA have over what universities actually do?

3.4 Summary

In this chapter I set out the analytical framework for the research and applied it to some initial analysis of the QAA's operation. Although somewhat abstract, Bernstein's concept of the pedagogic device and the creation, transmission and acquisition of knowledge, highlights the potential sphere of influence in which the QAA might operate. His concepts of recontextualisation, the ORF, and the PRF help to explore the role and influence of the QAA over the sites and process of mediation that take place in the interpretation and implementation of national policy for the assurance of academic standards and quality in higher education.

The chapter also highlights the continual pushes and pulls that the QAA experiences from the PRF and the ORF and their agents. It also suggests an apparent shift in the Agency from the more 'gentlemanly' approach to external review undertaken by AAU, HEQC, and the QAA at the start of the transitional arrangements (see Chapter two) to a somewhat more regulatory style, as exemplified by the changes in the tone and language of the UK Quality Code, and the tightening of the link between the Code and the judgements reached by institutional review teams. However, this shift is not necessarily simply a matter of the Agency using its guidance and review methods to reinforce government policy (Trow, 2005, p11; Williams, 2010, p5); in this instance, meeting the Government's agenda for a more marketised system. There appears to be some degree of cooperation or at the very least perhaps pragmatic acceptance by the PRF of these approaches, in order to safeguard the reputation of the sector. There also appears to be some *quid pro quo* between the Government and the sector, with the established universities being 'rewarded' with a more risk-based external review system, which should in theory reduce the burden of external review.

CHAPTER FOUR RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I outline the methodology adopted for the research. This includes a discussion of the overall research approach I elected to take, as well as the research methods used. As with most professional doctorates, I was researching within my own employing organisation and in a number of the universities which it reviews, an approach which Trowler (2011, p1) describes as **endogenous** research. Researchers, such as Hockey (1993) and Trowler (2011), note the benefits of endogenous research, including the ability to produce meaningful accounts as the researcher is culturally literate; producing research which is more likely to be useful to the organisation and to be taken notice of; more pragmatically it is cheaper and easier to undertake. Morse (1994, p222) suggests, however, that endogenous research is significantly problematic and can place the researcher in an untenable position in view of their role as an employee and the expectations which sit alongside that, and their role as a researcher. Trowler (2011, p2ff) is less critical of endogenous research, but highlights a number of issues that must be considered including: preserving anonymity, protecting the interviewees and organisations; gaining access to the interviewees/data; and interview or analysis bias. I will discuss each of these at the appropriate points in the chapter. A reflection of the strengths, weakness and limitations of the research methodology adopted is discussed in Chapter eight.

4.1 Research Approach

As noted in Chapter one, underlying the aims and purpose of the research was a very personal stimulus for the research. This meant that I was not only to be a researcher in conducting the study, but also a participant in the research itself. This position has implications for each aspect of the research: for example, reflexivity became a key

consideration throughout the research process (King and Horrocks, 2010, p22, p125). I will return to this discussion throughout the chapter.

In deciding what would be the best overall research approach to adopt, I noted that a number of the established researchers in the area of quality (assurance) in higher education had observed that it was a phenomenon which was socially constructed (Morley, 2004, p39; Filippakou and Tapper, 2008, p92). This suggested that the starting point for my own research was the recognition/acceptance that knowledge, in relation to the professional issue, is socially constructed. Therefore it was more appropriate that I adopted a *qualitative* research approach, rather than a *quantitative* one. A qualitative approach would enable me to explore the experiences of individuals in relation to the QAA.

The next step was to determine the model of qualitative research I was going to follow. Silverman (2013, p106-107) suggests that qualitative research can be naturalistic or constructivistic. In the former, the researcher focuses on 'what is going on here', in the latter on 'how it is happening'. Given that I had already established that quality assurance is social constructed and the professional issue was asking the question 'why', adopting a constructivist model seemed the most appropriate. This model also fitted with the analytical framework that I proposed to use.

By adopting this approach there appeared to be congruence between the professional issue, the research questions, the analytical framework, the research approach, and the research model.

4.2 Research Strategy

The research approach outlined above provided me with a number of options in terms of the research strategy I could adopt. Cresswell (2003, p14) and Silverman (2013, p108-109) suggest five possible strategies, although this list is by no means exhaustive.

In order to explore the professional issue fully, an important part of the research design was the ability to compare data about how individuals perceive the role of the QAA. This could have been achieved by comparing data gathered from individuals from different levels within one university. In this instance a case study approach would have been the most appropriate (Stake, 2000, p436; Cresswell, 2003, p15). However, since I thought that one of the reasons why the QAA was viewed in different ways might be because of the stratified/hierarchical nature of the university sector in England (see Chapter two), the research design had to allow me to look at a minimum of two universities. With the development of my 'ideal type' of university model, there needed to be three universities to reflect each 'ideal type' (see Chapter two). In this context three case studies would not have been possible with the resources available. I decided therefore to use a **cross-sectional** research strategy (Bryman, 2012, p59, p62). According to Bryman (2012, p59) selecting two or more cases (universities) should provide sufficient data to identify any variation. Another helpful feature of this strategy is that the data is gathered at more or less one single point in time. In my case the majority of the data was collected in two tranches (see section 4.6.1). This meant that I could collect data in a relatively short time, which was manageable with the demands of my full-time role at the QAA and with the resources available. This was particularly useful when, due to the demands of organising a move overseas, I did not leave myself a great deal of time within which to collect my second tranche of data.

4.3 Ethical Approval

In keeping with the requirements of the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University, my research proposal was considered by the School's Research Ethics Committee at its meeting of 1 June 2009. The research was approved subject to an amendment to the research consent form and information sheet⁶². The amendments were incorporated accordingly, were resubmitted and approval was confirmed on 4 June 2009.

4.4 Research Methods

4.4.1 Which data collection technique?

Having decided to adopt a cross-sectional research strategy, there were a number of research methods available to me with which to gather the data from individuals in the universities and the QAA. These included observation, interviews, focus groups, and documentary analysis. As noted earlier, the key to exploring the professional issue for me was hearing the 'voices' of those working within the universities and the QAA. While this would be possible to implement through documentary analysis, I wanted to collect primary rather than secondary data, so that I might hear the 'voices' more clearly and have the flexibility to explore issues as they arose. The decision to collect primary data did have some further implications for me as both an employee of the QAA and a researcher.

After considering the advantages and disadvantages of using the remaining options - observation and interviews - I elected to gather the data using **interviews**.

The option of using observation was attractive given the wealth of rich, naturally occurring data that this can produce (Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls, 2014, p53). It would have been particularly useful in exploring the recontextualisation process that I

⁶² I was requested to do the following: *'In both documents, please remove the statement that participants may contact you within 24 hours of the interview to change or recant anything, since participants have the right to withdraw at any point during your research'*.

suspected took place in the QAA and in the universities. However, I decided against using this method of data collection, for two reasons. Firstly, it relied solely on my interpretation as researcher of what I was observing (Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls, 2014, p55). This caused me some concern, because of the risk of significant research bias. When the data collection period began I had been working at the QAA for some seven years, and was firmly immersed in the culture and values of the organisation. I was concerned that I would not be able to observe what was really there, even using the techniques advocated by Delamont and Atkinson (1995, p3) and Delamont (2002) to '*make the familiar strange*' (see section 4.6.2). This bias could then be exacerbated in the subsequent analysis. The second reason was in relation to the ethical and pragmatic issues of me undertaking observation within the universities. As noted earlier (section 2.2) the QAA has power over the universities, in the sense that its institutional reviews result in a judgment and report which are publically available. Gathering data through observation was likely to be problematic because of the potential conflict of interest between my role as a researcher and my role as an Assistant Director for the QAA. My presence, for example, could change the nature of a meeting that I was observing, potentially skewing the data, what Bryman (2012, p496) describes as a '*reactive effect*'. I might have also been drawn into giving advice when observing committee meetings or while in the university generally, which would have been both a conflict of interest and unethical. To confirm if my concerns were correct, I had a number of informal discussions with contacts in universities which suggested that I was correct in my assessment of the situation. Participant observation within the QAA might have been more feasible, but I decided that with my very limited skills/experience in that area, I would not have been able to do justice to this method of data collection. I was not overly experienced in collecting data as a participant observer and was concerned whether I could collect data that was of value, while still contributing fully to the

‘observed event’ as an employee of the QAA. This did not prevent me from reflecting on my experience of working in the Agency during the data collection period, as I have done later in the thesis.

Thirdly, it was likely that I would have needed to undertake a number of observations at each university and the QAA; this was not feasible given my full-time employment.

Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls (2014, p55) note that the value of interviews is that *‘data can be generated that gives insight into participants’ lives or views via the active verbal communication of a group of individual interview’*. But as Silverman (2013, p202) quoting Holstein and Gubrium (1995) also suggests, there is an important issue in respect of interviews as to *‘whether interview responses are to be treated as giving direct access to “experience” and “feelings” or as actively constructed “narratives” involving activities which themselves demand analysis.’* Given the research model I have adopted, the data arising from the interviews were considered to consist of actively constructed narratives and, therefore a range of contextual factors needed to be taken account of in the analysis.

Despite these concerns, I noted that both Rubin and Rubin (1995, p51) and Yeo, Legard, Keegan, Ward, McNaughton Nicolls and Lewis (2014, p182) suggest that interviews are an appropriate and effective means of exploring the ways in which respondents experience and construct their lives. To this end interviews are helpful in understanding complex processes or relationships. As I have already suggested in Chapters two and three, the QAA is in the midst of a series of very complex interrelationships.

Interviews therefore appeared to be an appropriate means of collecting my data, but with the caveat that as both researcher, colleague and hence participant, there was still the issue of potential bias to consider. I will return to this point later in the chapter.

4.4.2 Interviews or focus groups

In order to hear the 'voices' of the respondents clearly, I decided that one-to-one interviews were preferable to focus groups, as I was not seeking to explore data that were generated through the interaction between the interviewees (Blaikie, 2010, p207; Finch, Lewis, Turley, 2014, p212). I was more interested in hearing the views of the individual (Silverman, 2013, p212). I decided that having the opportunity to concentrate on one individual at a time would help me obtain a more detailed understanding of the matters being discussed. It is easier to explore, probe and clarify responses when working on a one-to-one, face-to-face basis. This I hoped would lead to a richer pool of data to analyse (Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls, 2014, p56).

In deciding on which style of interview to adopt I considered what the purpose was in collecting the data (Punch, 2005, p170; Bryman, 2012, p468ff). As noted in section 4.1 above, I wanted to hear the perceptions of individuals about the QAA therefore I needed to gather reasonably in-depth information. The research also had a comparative element. Therefore it was important that the data I collected from the interviewees could be compared in its analysis. While one option was to adopt an open style of interviewing (Cresswell, 2003, p188), I decided against it as the process can produce a significant amount of disparate and extraneous material which would make coding time-consuming and comparative analysis problematic (Silverman, 1993, p92-93; Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p5). Using the semi-structured interview meant that there was sufficient structure in the data collection process to make comparative analysis feasible, by providing some consistency in the areas discussed, but it also allowed the interviewees to talk personally and in-depth about how they viewed the QAA. It was also sufficiently flexible to allow me to probe and explore particular points with the interviewees (Bryman, 2012, p324, p471-472). By adopting the semi-structured technique there was alignment between the

professional issue, the research questions and my research approach (Punch, 2005, p170).

4.4.3 Selecting the research sites

The universities

I have already described in Chapter two how I developed the notion of the three ‘ideal types’ of universities as a means of categorising some 101 universities in England at time of the interviews in the universities (see section 2.4). This categorisation allowed me to identify a number of universities to approach with a view to being involved in the research. The aim was to secure the participation of three universities: one which most closely resembled a ‘doctrinal ideal type’ of university; one a ‘secular ideal type’, and one a ‘vocational ideal type’ of university. This would enable me to undertake an intra- and inter- comparison of the views of the respondents, which as noted earlier was a key consideration for exploring the professional issue.

In order to achieve this aim, I adopted a ‘*purposive sampling*’ technique (Silverman, 2000, p104; Cresswell, 2003, p185; Bryman, 2012, p418) which enabled me to use a more strategic approach in selecting the universities in order to ensure that each ‘ideal type’ was represented. Once the universities had been categorised into the ‘ideal type’ of university they most closely resembled, I then looked for similar sized institutions⁶³ with which to compare as this should mean that there was less likely to be major difference in relation to the quality assurance structures in place. The operational distance, for example, between the senior managers, quality professionals and academics in a university with small student numbers might be significantly different from that of a large university. Such differences would make any comparative analysis more difficult.

⁶³ Size was based on the number of undergraduate and postgraduate students as listed in the HESA data for 2007/08 (HESA 2009).

For each university, I also checked the outcome of the most recent QAA Institutional Audit. As there had been so few institutional audits which resulted in anything other than a 'confidence' judgement, approaching a university with a 'limited confidence' or 'no confidence' judgement would be inappropriate as the data gathered might refer to the judgement and mean that the university could be identified more easily. Such an approach might also be seen to be insensitive.

A final consideration was whether I had a contact at the university, at an appropriate level, who could approach the appropriate gatekeeper, on my behalf, to see if access was possible. This strategy was recommended by Punch (1994, p86).

After undertaking these processes I produced a list of universities to approach to see if they would be willing to participate in the research.

4.4.4 Gaining access and consent

The QAA

As part of gaining support of the QAA, as my employer, to undertake the professional doctorate, I had to provide an outline of my research proposal. This proposal had to be approved by the Directorate of the Agency which included confirmation that permission had been given, in principle, for QAA staff to participate in the research. This agreement did not, however, oblige any individual employee to participate. Such agreement was on an individual basis. The gatekeeper's continued permission was confirmed through the annual review system, where an update of progress with the research was considered by the Directorate and reported to the QAA Board as the ultimate authority of the Agency.

In June 2009, once ethical approval had been granted by Cardiff University (see section 4.3), I approached the then Chief Executive of the QAA and the Chair of the QAA's Board of Directors, through the appropriate protocols, to see if they would be prepared

to be interviewed. After agreement in principle, I emailed each of them further information about the research, including the purpose of the interview, the areas that the interview would cover and the estimated length of time it would take. This was presented in an information sheet for the interviewees. I also provided them with a consent form, which could be completed prior to the interview (see appendix 2).

As the Chief Executive of the QAA was due to change on 1 October 2009, I also approached the Chief Executive designate for an interview, through the appropriate contact at his employing organisation. In his role as Chief Executive of that organisation it was not necessary to contact a gatekeeper separately. In the process of securing the interview I provided the same information as outlined above.

The interviews took place in August and October 2009. I also conducted a second interview with the 'new' Chief Executive 18 months after he had taken up his post at the QAA.

To secure interviews with the Assistant Directors of the QAA, I emailed them as a cohort providing the same details about the interviews as I had to the Chief Executive, the Chief Executive designate and the Chair of the Board.

I elected to email them as a single cohort because in this context they are a naturally formed group (Cresswell, 2003, p164) and therefore ethically all members should be invited to participate. Accordingly, the Assistant Directors that volunteered were self-selecting, as this would avoid any suggestion of their being coerced into participating in my research.

Another consideration was that the Assistant Directors were also my work colleagues, some of whom I had worked with closely for a number of years, others I knew less well but with whom I still had a shared professional identity. The advantage of this shared identity was a common language and an established relationship which Yeo, Legard,

Keegan, Ward, McNaughton Nicholls and Lewis (2014, p180-181) stress as important part of the interview process. The disadvantage was that it could have led to assumptions being made by the interviewee and myself about the level of understanding in what was being said. This would not have been a problem for a researcher from outside the organisation. Such a researcher would not necessarily be able to understand the nuances embedded in what was being said in the same way I could as an 'insider' researcher.

To try to take account of the challenges of endogenous research I adopted a more reflective approach to the interviews and the subsequent data analysis (see section 4.7.2 for the discussion in relation to data analysis). In terms of asking the questions I piloted the interview schedules (see section 4.5.1) and in terms of hearing what was being said, I was cognisant of techniques developed in ethnographic research and other personal/professional development resources. For example I referred to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) and Klien (1999).

Of the 22 Assistant Directors who were based at the QAA's Gloucester office⁶⁴ at the time⁶⁵, 15 responded to my email (equating to 68 per cent response rate). Twelve interviews were arranged and undertaken over a nine day period. The remaining three Assistant Directors who had expressed an interest were unable to undertake an interview because of diary commitments.

The universities

Once a list of potential research sites had been identified, I approached the universities where I thought I was most likely to be given access. I emailed my contact in each of these institutions explaining the nature of my research, why I was contacting them and

⁶⁴ The QAA also has an office in Glasgow, out of which QAA Scotland operates.

⁶⁵ As the research focussed on universities in England, alone, I only contacted Assistant Directors who undertook reviews or developmental work in England, rather than the other countries in the UK.

what was involved in being part of the study. Once interest in participating had been confirmed in principle, or another more appropriate contact identified, I sent them further details about the research and the interviews. This information included who I would most like to interview in terms of their role within the university, a paper giving a more detailed overview of the research, an information sheet for the interviewees and an example of the consent form (see appendices 2 and 3).

King and Horrocks (2010, p31) note the benefits of having ‘insider assistance’ when organising the interviews at a distance. They suggest that gaining access and recruiting of interviewees are more likely to be successful if an ‘insider’ is involved. Indeed, I had expected that I would have to use a staged approach in getting access; contacting a different university if the previous one did not wish to participate. However, this was not necessary, all of the universities I initially contacted agreed to participate in the research. The process of using ‘insider’ contacts to approach the appropriate gatekeepers within the universities on my behalf had been successful. In each instance the ‘insider’ contact confirmed that authority from the appropriate gatekeeper had been given. This formal confirmation allayed some initial concerns I had about using ‘insider’ contacts in this way. I wondered how I would ensure that appropriate and ethical protocols had been followed without causing offence to my contact by implying that they were untrustworthy.

The ‘insider’ contacts also arranged the majority of the interviews for me. To facilitate this I provided a role brief of the type of individuals I would like to see, comprising: a senior member of staff with responsibility for quality assurance, such as a pro-vice chancellor; the head of the office or team responsible for quality assurance⁶⁶; two heads of school (or equivalent); a member of academic staff with no specific responsibility for

⁶⁶ In two instances this role was held by former academics, and in one instance this was held by an individual from an administrative background.

quality assurance; and an appropriate sabbatical officers in the Students' Union. In one instance I contacted the sabbatical officer directly to organise the interview.

Gaining individual consent

Wiles (2013, p39) notes that gaining informed consent is not always straightforward. To this end, I took a number of steps to try and ensure that I had provided all the opportunities I could for the interviewees to give their informed consent. As noted above, information about the research and the individual interviews was provided to the 'insider contacts' who were approaching the potential interviewees on my behalf. In the case of the Assistant Directors this information was provided to them directly.

The information provided included a clear statement that the research was for a professional doctorate and not for the QAA's own purposes. It was important to make this distinction clear because of the power relation that the Agency has with the universities, since its external review reports are published. For the QAA employees it was also important to assure them that the data was not going to be used in any staff assessment process. The information also detailed how the data would be recorded, stored, written up and used. It also indicated who would have access to the raw data and how anonymity and confidentiality was to be protected (Punch, 1994, p92; Kvale, 1996, p113-114; Wiles, 2013, p25, p29, p34). A copy of a consent form was also part of the information provided. As noted earlier, both the information sheet and consent form had been approved, subject to a minor amendment, by Cardiff University (see section 4.3).

As I did not have direct control over how the interviewees had been recruited by the 'insider' contact, I emailed the information sheet and consent form to the interviewee once the interview dates had been agreed. On the day of the interview, I also carried copies of both documents with me and after general introductions, these were discussed with the interviewee. I then gave them the opportunity to read the information sheet and consent form, and to sign it if they so wished. A small number of respondents brought a

signed copy of the form with them. In this instance I checked that they had understood the content of both documents and that they understood what they had signed. In all instances I asked whether the interviewee had any questions for me and also reiterated that they could withdraw from the research at any time. This latter point is, according to King and Horrocks (2010, p115) is an important ethical consideration.

4.5 Preparing for the Interviews

4.5.1 Piloting the interview questions

Silverman (2013, p207) states that piloting or testing out the styles of questions is a feature of good research. I developed three interview schedules: one each for the interviews being undertaken at each level within the QAA and the universities. All the schedules were based around a set of core questions which were modified to suit the setting in which they were being conducted (see appendix 4). Each interview schedule was piloted ahead of being used. This was done in a number of different ways depending on access to individuals in similar positions to those being interviewed, and the time available.

In relation to the QAA interviews, a pilot interview was conducted with an Assistant Director who was not available during the data collection period. The interview was conducted as if 'for real' and notes taken. At its end I asked the interviewee about the questions, the order in which they were given, the pace and length of the interview, and my interview skills. The interview was not recorded and this was a mistake (see below). After the interview I also produced a set of notes about my reflections on how the interview went. This was an approach that I continued to use after each interview proper. I reflected on how the interview went, on the questions and on my questioning technique/style, the effectiveness of these skills, and how I felt physically and emotionally. This proved a useful technique, particularly when I only had a very short

time between interviews during one day. At the end of each day I would go back over my notes and add to them if necessary. I would then look at these notes against Kvale's (1996, p148-149) and Bryman's (2012, p425) criteria of a successful interviewer. This helped me to identify the areas/skills which I needed to modify before the next groups of interviews.

In relation to the interview schedules to be used in **the universities**, I used a slightly different approach because time was short. A copy of the interview schedule was sent for comment to members of staff in universities not involved in the research. The schedules were sent to staff in similar roles to those I was planning to interview⁶⁷. Detailed comments were received back from all three individuals.

While the feedback received back from the university staff was extremely useful and helped in finalising the interview schedules (see below), I was not able to pilot the interview schedules in situ and I did not have the same degree of experience of conducting the interviews in the local setting (the universities) that I had prior to conducting the QAA interviews. This was a weakness of the research.

Both types of piloting and my reflective notes provided feedback that the interview schedules were generally suitable. A number of minor changes were made, mainly in relation to the ordering of questions.

Another weakness of the piloting process was that I did not pilot the whole process, just the interview schedules. In hindsight, it would have been helpful to have recorded and also transcribed part of the pilot interview. This would have allowed me to test the transcription and initial coding process, as well as the degree of 'neutrality' of the full interview process. As I noted in section 4.0 above, being both researcher and participant has implications for the level and nature of the bias embedded in the research. Piloting

⁶⁷ A Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC) with responsibility for quality assurance, a Head of Quality, and an academic without responsibility for quality assurance.

the interview schedule helped to identify issues such as any leading questions, but not whether I approached the transcription and coding process with preconceptions/bias of which I was not aware. Had this also been done, I believe it would have resulted in a more refined set of interview questions, even more pertinent to the aims of this research. Three interview schedules were devised based on a set of core questions which enabled comparison (see appendices 4-6). A schedule was created for the interviews with the QAA staff; one for the interviews with staff in the universities and one for the officers from the Students' Union. Where appropriate the schedules were nuanced in the language used for a particular respondent group. For example in the interviews with the quality professionals compared to the academic staff.

4.5.2 Provision of transcripts

Researchers, such as Janesick (1994, p216) and Bell, (1999, p140), suggest that it is good research practice to ensure that interviewees see a copy of their interview transcript, in order to verify its contents. After considering the practicalities of providing all of the interviewees with their transcript automatically after the interview, I decided that in the majority of instances a transcript would be provided on the request. This offer was stated in the consent form and reiterated at the end of the interview.

In three cases the transcript(s) were provided as standard however, as I planned to present the data by role. In doing this would mean that these interviewees would be easily identifiable. The transcript was annotated highlighting the text that was likely to be quoted in the thesis in one colour, and text that might be paraphrased and attributed to them highlighted in another. To this end the transcripts were provided to back to the interviewees fairly close to submission so that the text could be highlighted accurately. The interviewees were asked to confirm whether they were willing for the highlighted

text to be included in the thesis. All of them confirmed they were happy for this to happen. One interviewee amended the text slightly to make it more readable.

4.6 The Interviews in Practice

4.6.1 The interviewees

In total, 32 interviews were conducted between July 2009 and June 2011; 16 at the QAA (June – September 2009) and 16 in the universities (May – June 2011) (see Table 1 below). The current Chief Executive of the QAA was interviewed on two occasions, as I was interested to hear what his views were 18 months into his role. The first interview was conducted when he was Chief Executive designate.

Table 1 Interviews conducted in each research site

Universities					QAA	
Role	Generic role title	Lyttelton	Opawa	Merivale		Role
Senior academic (PVC T&L)	Senior management	1	1		1	Chair of Board
Senior administrative (Registrar)				1	1	Chief Executive (2002-2009)
Head of Quality Unit or equivalent	Quality professional	1	1	1	2	Chief Executive (2009-to date)
Academic staff with management responsibility	Academic (managers)	1	2	1	12	Assistant Directors
Academic staff with responsibility for quality assurance	Academic (quality)	1	0	1		
Academic staff with no quality assurance responsibilities	Academic		1			
Students' Union Officer	Students' Union Officer	1	1	1		
	Totals	5	6	5	16	

In order to protect anonymity each of the universities was given a pseudonym: the University of Lyttelton for the university that most closely resembled the 'doctrinal' university, the University of Opawa the 'secular' university and the University of

Merivale, the ‘vocational’ university⁶⁸. In relation to the individual interviews, each was given a number and the transcripts, subsequent coding and analysis referred to that number. Quotes from the interviews that are used later in the thesis are reported by generic role title (as seen in Table 1). Differentiation between individuals holding the same role within the QAA is denoted by a different letter after the role title. This was done to ensure that no one single individual’s views dominated excessively. The exception to this method of reporting was in the case of the Chief Executives and Chair of the Board of the QAA. I have already discussed how I checked the accuracy of their transcripts because protecting anonymity was not feasible (see section 4.5.2).

As noted in section 4.4.2 above, I wanted, ideally, to undertake six interviews in each of the universities, but this was not always possible. In one university it was not possible to arrange a mutually convenient date to interview the relevant Pro-Vice Chancellor. The Registrar, who was very experienced in quality assurance and to whom the quality unit ultimately reported, was interviewed instead.

The respondents represented a range of ages and length of time working within higher education or the QAA. In the QAA, the Assistant Directors came from a variety of backgrounds; seven had previously held academic positions in universities, or other higher education providers. The remainder had held administrative posts within the higher education sector. In the universities, the academic staff interviewed came from a range of disciplines within art and design, sciences, and the humanities.

4.6.2 Conducting the interviews

Prior to undertaking the interviews at the universities I followed Stake’s (1994, p238) suggestion and collected information about the institution including the most recent

⁶⁸ The names are suburbs of Christchurch, New Zealand through which I travelled on the bus to the library at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology, or at the University of Canterbury. Both provided an invaluable space in which to work. The names were allocated randomly to each university.

QAA Institutional Audit report. This provided me with details of the university's mission and focus and the quality assurance processes operating in the institution. Such information helped me to familiarise myself with the context of the institution. It also meant that I was able to listen with more understanding, if respondents mentioned specific institutional policies and procedures, or outcomes of previous interactions with the QAA.

As noted earlier, an important consideration in doing endogenous research is to recognise the challenges of being both researcher and participant (Trowler 2011) I had two concerns; firstly that the interviewees would not be able to see me as anything other than an Assistant Director of the QAA and this might skew what was said to me. For example, the interviewees might be more generous in their description about the Agency than they might otherwise be to a research independent of the Agency (see section 8.3.2). Secondly, I was concerned that I, too, might not be able move away from my QAA identity and conduct the interviews as a researcher. Therefore, I decided to adopt a technique suggested by Morse (1994, p223) to provide a clear visual statement, through what I wore, to the effect that I was not on QAA business when I visited the universities to undertake the interviews. My normal attire when visiting a university on behalf of the QAA would be formal office wear. For the purposes of the interviews I dressed less formally. While this might seem a pedantic measure, it also helped me to prepare for the interviews. I was there as a researcher, not as an Assistant Director. I employed a similar approach when interviewing the Assistant Directors at the QAA. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p141) and Lofland and Lofland (1995, p55) suggest that it is important to portray an appropriate self-image and professional behaviour in the context of the interview and the individual being interviewed, therefore I returned to more formal office wear when I interviewed the Chief Executives and the Chair of the QAA Board.

The interviews themselves were usually conducted in the interviewee's office or a meeting room where that was more suitable for the interviewee; for example where offices are shared. The interviews lasted between 25 and 65 minutes. The interviewees were not interviewed in any specific order, only when they were available. Nisbet and Watt (1984, p78) suggest interviewing senior people later rather than earlier in the schedule because at that point the researcher is more likely to have a better idea of the broader picture. However, I did not think it appropriate to ask the 'insider' contact at the universities to do this, and in hindsight I think it would have made little difference to the nature of the interview undertaken.

Although the interviewees were informed in the consent form that the interview would be recorded, I asked them again at the beginning of the session. In keeping with Lofland and Lofland's view (1995, p86-87), I found recording the interviews and only taking brief notes meant that I was more able to focus on what the interviewee was saying. I could follow up any points of interest easily, clarify my understanding, and engage with the interviewee by maintaining eye contact and using body language to reflect my interest in what they were saying. I was also able to note the time and gently bring the interviewee back to the interview schedule where necessary.

As noted in Chapter one, during the data collection period I left the QAA prior to moving overseas and the interviews were conducted in slightly different contexts. All the interviews with the QAA staff and the interviews in one of the universities were conducted while I was working at the Agency. The interviews in the two other universities were conducted shortly after I left the QAA. This change of role had little notable impact on the nature of the interviews as I was still deeply immersed in the language of quality assurance and the QAA.

4.7 Transcription and Analysis

4.7.1 Transcription

Where possible the interviews were transcribed as quickly as possible after the interview took place. For this to take place an experienced transcriber, with the permission of the interviewees, was used for six of the early interviews. I transcribed the first two interviews, so that I might get a sense of the transcription process and decide on the level of detail needed. This enabled me to provide detailed instructions for the other transcriber, as recommended by Kvale (1996, p169). While this was an effective use of resources in many respects and cross checking of the transcript against the original recording for example resulted in minimal changes, I felt increasingly detached from the data and decided once time permitted to transcribe the remaining (24) interviews myself. Although relatively time-consuming, I found the process invigorating as I was once again immersed in the interviews. Kvale (1996, p164) notes that the transcription process is '*interpretational in character*' and therefore by limiting the number of people undertaking the transcription, I tried to limit the degree of interpretation. As noted earlier, as a researcher I tried to be aware of what I 'brought' to the data collection and analysis process, particularly my biases. I could not have known in any detail how the values of the other transcriber had influenced the transcription process.

In addition, by transcribing the majority of the interviews the movement into the formal data analysis process was blurred and more productive. A benefit highlighted by Lofland and Lofland (1995, p88).

At the start of the transcription process I was not clear about the level of detail I required from the interviews. I noted the advice from Kvale (1996, p165) that a verbatim transcription is no more objective than one which is more of an idealised

realisation of the interviewee's words. But I appreciated that I needed to try some different degrees of transcription before coming to a decision. This is where recording and transcribing the pilot interview would have been helpful.

I tried a number of different levels of detail when I was transcribing. At a minimum, I transcribed all the spoken words; I also tried transcribing a number of the non-verbal cues, including length of pauses, major facial expression and coughing (Silverman, 1993, p118; King and Horrocks, 2010, p144). Reflecting on the additional time taken to transcribe the interviews and the nature of the extra information provided, I decided that the level of detail did not provide anything meaningful for the analysis I wished to undertake. I decided, therefore, not to transcribe any non-verbal cues and only to transcribe the interviews verbatim to the point where such an approach began to obscure or reduce the readability of the text.

Each transcript was compared against the original interview to check for accuracy. I found it helpful to leave a short period of time before undertaking the checking process so that I could review the interview afresh. During the checking process, I also highlighted any interesting points within the interview itself.

4.7.2 Coding and analysis

In undertaking the data analysis, I adopted the method suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2005, p207-208) which emphasises the iterative process of reading and rereading the interviews. They identified six stages in the process: '*recognition*' where key concepts, themes, events are identified; '*clarifying*' what is meant by specific concepts and themes; '*synthesising*' where different versions of events are put together. This is followed by '*coding*' the data, where the coding structure is developed and applied and the data is '*sorted*' into groupings or clusters of themes. The final stage is '*final synthesis*' where concepts and themes are combined to suggest identifying relationships,

variations and nuances in order to identify explanatory concepts. This leads to an overall description of the explanatory concepts for the topic studied, before the broader significance is identified. These stages are similar to those outlined by Kvale's (1996, p193-204) description of the coding process '*meaning condensation*', '*meaning categorisation*', '*meaning structuring*', '*meaning interpretation*', '*ad hoc meaning generation*'.

During the transcription process I began to note separately any interesting or recurring words or phrases which appeared in the text. This began to form the basis of a coding framework which I reviewed and added to on a regular basis. I also began to highlight in colour any particularly interesting, novel or unusual views in the transcripts themselves. I also added my own thoughts or noted cross linkages I had spotted within the interview or in other ones; what Lofland and Lofland (1995, p193) refer to as 'memoing'. Therefore each transcript became a working document not only providing raw data, but also capturing initial thoughts for the analysis.

Once all the transcripts for a particular organisation had been completed, I uploaded them into NVIVO 8 and began to code them using a combination of the coding framework mentioned above, and further free coding, amending the coding framework where appropriate.

During the coding process I reread the transcripts of the interviews on a number of occasions to become immersed in the data. I found that the coding process fractured the interviews to such a degree that their overall meaning could be lost. At one point I realised that the coding had become so specific that the data within nodes was too small to be meaningful and the framework too large to be manageable. I subsequently reduced the number of nodes by aggregating the categories and recoding.

In order to move from the coding process to the analytical process, I began to write summaries for each of the revised nodes, firstly identifying the characteristics of the

node in order to ensure consistency in the coding process, and secondly to draw out the analytical themes that emerged from the data, for example: ‘market’, ‘tools’, ‘structures’ ‘science’ (see Figure 6 below). In this context, an analytical theme was *‘any recurrent and distinctive features of participants’ accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences’* (King and Horrocks, 2010, p150).

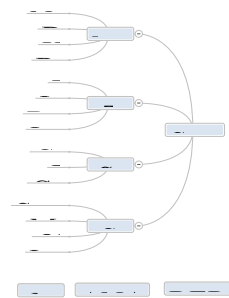


Figure 6 Illustration of the development of analytical and reporting themes

The data within the analytical themes were analysed by institutional type and the role of the interviewee. In each instance I was looking for differences and similarities in what was being said, as well as any apparent contradictions within and across the interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p230; Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p95). I also looked for possible reasons for these occurrences. For example, was a particular level in the universities saying similar things; was it dependent on the 'ideal type' the university most closely resembled; or on how long the individual had worked at the QAA; was the interviewee speaking about their own experience or the views of others?

The analytical themes were also reviewed against Bernstein's concepts identified in section 3.1.2 above. Again, I asked a series of questions, for example: Who is QAA acting on behalf of, the ORF or PRF? Who is controlling/influencing the three rules of the pedagogic device? What direction is the recontextualising/mediating?

The analytical themes were considered against the research questions to identify the reporting themes. In this context the reporting themes were descriptions used to present the findings. For example, in Figure 6 above, the analytical themes were considered in relation to research question one and how the role of the QAA was perceived, the reporting theme therefore was the QAA as 'Structural Engineer'.

To help validate the accuracy of the findings as recommended by Creswell (2003, p196) I used a 'peer debriefer' to review and ask questions about the empirical findings so that *'the account will resonate with people other than the researcher'* (2003, p196). To this end, the empirical chapters were also shared with two former colleagues from the QAA, one who was interviewed as part of the research, and one who was not. Both had previously worked in universities as a quality professional and an academic respectively. They confirmed that the account reflected their understanding of the 'world'.

A protracted process

As the coding and analysis were undertaken over a protracted period of time, I read through all the individual interviews again on two occasions to re-engage with the data. This provided me with the opportunity to look at the data afresh and where appropriate, nodes were recoded or the summaries amended. This approach was particularly useful when I returned to the UK and was working for a university in a quality role. I was able now to read through the interviews in the universities from a slightly different perspective. Although the coding did not need to change in my view, I felt more able to identify some of the nuances in the data that I did not necessarily appreciate were embedded in my QAA background.

Making the familiar strange

After working at the QAA for nine years I was concerned that I was too ingrained in the organisation, its culture and discourse to be able to hear all that was being said to me or to analyse the data with limited bias. As I undertook the data analysis and writing up I also realised that I still felt a sense of responsibility to those with whom I had previously worked. This occurrence is highlighted by Lofland and Lofland (1995, p28) and Punch's (1994, p93).

Aware of the work in ethnographic research on this matter, I looked to Delamont and Atkinson (1995, p3) and Delamont (2002) for ideas about how to make the familiar strange. Although many of their suggestions were too resource intensive for my situation, their use of questions and the examples provided, albeit predominantly in ethnographic studies, were helpful. For example because of the contested nature of the QAA's work and my allegiance to the QAA and former colleagues there, I found it helpful to follow up Delamont's (2002, p43) citation of Becker and to retrieve his original article. His discussion about the need for researchers to consider '*whose side are we on*' and acknowledge that the researcher's feelings might distort the findings

(1967, p239-241) was illuminating. In analysing the data I questioned whether my allegiances to the QAA were clouding what I was hearing from the universities. Similarly in writing up the findings I tried to free myself from the cautious approach to reporting that had been instilled in me at the QAA and not to suppress the findings because they were contentious, or potentially damaging to the reputation of the QAA. Becker (1967, p241-242) advises that cognisance needs to be taken of the potential to treat one interviewee's view as more credible than another because of their position in the hierarchy within an organisation, or identify expected responses because of the university's perceived position in the sector's hierarchy of prestige. Throughout the analysis and reporting I found it helpful to ask myself whose side was I on and whether this was distorting my research in such a way as to make it invalid (Becker, 1967, p245-246).

The experience of working in a university in England before the end of the research period also helped me to look at the data afresh.

4.8 Summary

In this chapter I have set out the approach taken to collect and analyse the data for this research. I have discussed the pragmatic factors which influenced the approaches adopted, including the challenge of undertaking endogenous research. In practice such research did not provide any major difficulties or resistance from interviewees, although there was some stiltedness in the interviews with some of the academic staff. More direct contact with them prior to the interview might have been helpful. My departure from the QAA during the research period might have lessened some of the difficulties that Hockey (1993) and Le Gallais (2008) allude to regarding reaction to the research once it is published, or, in my case, submitted with a summary report provided to the Directorate.

CHAPTER FIVE FINDINGS I: THE ROLE OF THE QAA

5.0 Introduction

This is the first of three chapters that present the findings from the analysis of the interview data. This chapter and the next will explore the themes identified in relation to the role of the QAA and how it is understood across and within the three universities and the QAA itself. The themes identified were: **guardian** of academic standards and autonomy; **structural engineer** in relation to the structures and power relations within universities; the legitimacy of the Agency's scope of work which I have summarised in phrase '**mission creep**'; and **mutuality and perceptions** and the challenges this brings for the QAA.

In addition, the second empirical chapter (Chapter six) explores the QAA's relationship with the PRF and ORF and discusses the challenges of those relationships and how they can be so easily misconstrued.

In the final empirical chapter (Chapter seven) I highlight the aspects which the QAA respondent identified as influencing how the universities perceive the Agency's role and how they recontextualise its messages. In this context I also discuss the capacity of the different universities have to undertake this recontextualisation process.

In setting out the sections in this way and by using Bernstein's analytical framework, identified in Chapter three, the following three chapters will also explore each of the research questions as identified in Chapter three. Discussion of the implications for the QAA and the overarching professional issue of the data is reserved for the concluding chapter (Chapter eight).

5.1 Guardian

In this theme three aspects were identified from the analysis of the data: the QAA's role in safeguarding academic standards, the comparability of standards, and the protection of the autonomy of the PRF.

5.1.1 Safeguarding academic standards

All the respondents in the universities and the QAA considered that the Agency had a legitimate role in safeguarding academic standards across the sector, by acting as '*an underwriter of minimum standards which institutions must meet*' [Senior manager, University of Lyttelton]. In doing so, the QAA was considered to be providing reassurance to the public and the Government that institutions in receipt of public funding and/or holders of degree awarding powers were exercising their authority appropriately and were accountable for their actions.

It is not surprising that the PRF were content with this aspect of the guardian role. As noted in Chapter two, the PRF had already 'bought into' the idea of external quality assurance, whether this was through compliance with the CNAA in the case of the public sector institutions, or in the case of the universities through the establishment of their own external body: the AAU and then the HEQC. The QAA was therefore continuing with these arrangements and indeed, once subject level review had been revoked, was operating in the same way as the AAU and HEQC by focussing on institutional level review alone. In Bernstein's terms, the PRF had reclaimed ownership of the evaluative rules which determine what is being taught, how it is being taught and what counts as the valid acquisition of the curriculum (Singh, 2002, p573), areas which subject level review had threatened (see section 3.2.1).

What was interesting was that all the senior managers and quality professionals spoke of the disastrous consequences of a bad institutional review. This suggests that the QAA

had significant power over the universities. Five of the QAA respondents also spoke of this very real fear contributing to the Agency's authority; not least because of the risk it placed on continued financial support from bodies outside the sector. But in reality this was a perceived authority as the Agency does not have any direct sanctions to place on failing institutions that remain under the auspices of the HEFCE. It is also a perceived fear because, at the time of the interviews, very few universities had received anything less than a positive review outcome.

'...it's a perceived authority in so much that we're looked upon sometimes as being the big, bad people but our authority is implied because we know we don't have any; it's implied by the Funding Council who contract us... our authority if you like is indirect because a poor report to the Funding Council can have implications... [such as] an institution having to curb its expansion plans because the banks downgraded their financial status.'

[Assistant Director (f)]

'...the sanctions which it [QAA] has are also very effective in giving the Agency authority, like the issuing of a poor judgement would be very damaging to the reputation of an institution.'

[Chair of the Board]

The majority of the respondents from the universities acknowledged that the QAA also had a legitimate role in protecting the UK higher education brand by using mechanisms which evaluate the performance of each higher education provider, "sanctioning" those who do not meet the nationally agreed standards and praising those where strong evidence exists to support their claims to provide high quality higher education. One academic suggested that without the QAA, all kinds of practices could take place:

'...we need something that maintains consistency [in standards] and assures the quality of what's going on in higher education. Otherwise all kinds of things would probably be going on. "Spend your hundred pounds and get a degree" kind of thing... I mean if we didn't have the QAA we would have no idea.'

[Academic (manager), University of Merivale]

The phrase *'all kinds of things'* is quite powerful and suggests that there is a real mistrust within the PRF of the actions of colleagues if the QAA were not in place to act as guardian.

The Students' Union sabbatical officer also from the University of Merivale, echoed the academic's comments when she noted that:

'[QAA] makes sure that the university is doing things properly I guess. Whereas if they were left on their own, things may go wrong.... It's just to keep everything in the right processes.'

[Students' Union Sabbatical Officer, University of Merivale]

The similarity in these views and elsewhere between the Students' Union sabbatical officers and also parts of the university is interesting, and suggests that there is a distinct cultural position in each university about the QAA and quality assurance more broadly.

This scepticism was heightened and the guardian role of the QAA considered increasingly important in the light of the Government's desire to extend the sector to new providers. In this context, the QAA's role was described by the majority of the respondents as being to protect the sector from 'rogue institutions'.

'... if we are continuing with a move towards more private providers and growing the number of institutions, agencies, organisations that are going to be providing tertiary education... we need to make sure that they are doing the job properly.'

[Academic (manager), University of Opawa]

It might also be suggested that there is concern within the PRF that opening the market might introduce a new kind of PRF with a different culture and values which might, in turn, weaken the position of the current PRF.

Similarly the majority of the QAA respondents spoke of the Agency's role in guarding entry into the higher education 'club', recommending⁶⁹ or refusing entry as they saw fit.

⁶⁹ Recommendations from QAA's Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers are considered by the Privy Council, who has the final decision.

Entry could be through by achieving degree awarding powers, or the more exclusive achievement or being granted the use of the title ‘university’. The screening and assessing of organisations that might wish to enter was seen as increasingly significant as the sector was opened to a greater number of new providers⁷⁰.

‘I think degree awarding powers have become increasingly important especially as we’ve gone into the private institutions and lots of new institutions [particularly] in London.’

[Assistant Director (g)]

Indeed the Chair of the QAA Board of Directors also spoke of the need for the QAA to monitor and raise any issues regarding the new or proposed entrants

‘I am chair of ACDAP and I am conscious of the way in which all sorts of other bodies are now providing degrees and some of the issues arising from that. As things are going, it won’t be very long before you can get your degree at Tesco; I don’t exaggerate all that much. I think it’s plausible.’

[Chair of the Board]

This would suggest that one role of the QAA is also to protect what the higher education system should look like, and to control the nature of any changes/expansion to the sector.

For the Students’ Union sabbatical officers, the safeguarding role was important, particularly in relation to teaching and learning. The suggestion in the use of the word ‘exposing’ is that the QAA has a role in relation to establishing the ‘truth’ of what exactly is going on in the universities.

‘I think obviously focussing on each institution’s really key and really exposing problems in institutions... if there’s unsatisfactory level of teaching and learning across an institution or in certain departments in an institution that should be exposed.’

[Students’ Union sabbatical officer, University of Lyttelton]

⁷⁰ Since the interviews QAA’s remit has been extended and all institutions offering higher education, irrespective of the source of funding have to undertake scrutiny by QAA through Review for Education Oversight or Review for Specific Course Designation (QAA, 2014a)

Although the sabbatical officer from the University of Opawa suggested that Students’

Unions should have more of a consumer protectionist role.

‘...in the coming years Students’ Unions are going to have to take a much stronger role when it comes to helping a student ensure that they are getting value for money. I’m speaking to NUS at the moment about how Students’ Unions are almost going to have to take on a term of watchdog’

[Students’ Union sabbatical officer, University of Opawa]

This would suggest that the QAA’s work in relation to the student agenda is a sensible development, if it is to continue to have a role in the changing higher education landscape (see section 6.1.2).

5.1.2 Comparability of standards

While there was general agreement that the QAA had a legitimate role in safeguarding academic standards there were contrasting views about the degree to which the Agency promoted the concept of comparable academic standards. The senior manager at the University of Lyttelton spoke of the damaging nature of the QAA’s role in promoting the myth that there is **direct comparability** of standards across the sector and in the student experience. He noted that although there had been a recent softening of the QAA’s language when talking about institutions meeting threshold standards, it was insufficient to mitigate against the damage done by the impression of direct comparability.

‘...it [the QAA] has given life to the idea that actually there is a direct comparability [between institutions] which is hugely corrosive to discussions about quality and standards in the UK.’

[Senior manager, University of Lyttelton]

The senior manager also suggested that a number of institutions would not wish this notion of direct comparability to be dispelled, because it helped them to promote their reputation/status. Nor would such institutions wish the QAA to speak only of

minimum/threshold standards or publicise the wide variation in the student experience that exists in the sector once baseline standards have been met.

'I think there are some in the sector and by that I mean universities, forty odd now that have quite a lot to gain from an Agency that gives the impression that there is direct comparability and as a result of that do not want to see the Agency change; do not want it to do anything that would just give a sense of policing de minimis standards and above that line there is a wide variation in terms of the learning outcomes, quality of the student experience, because that would be damaging to them.'

[Senior manager, University of Lyttelton]

This quotation provides an interesting example of the diverse self-interests and lack of trust within the PRF, as well as the perception, by those who place their institution at the 'higher' end of the perceived hierarchy of prestige, that the Agency is appropriated by those institutions at the 'lower' end of the hierarchy. This findings are echoed by Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2015, p619) who note that some higher education providers adopt the language of the ORF to establish the legitimacy of their claims that they are of high quality. This also links to my findings in respect of the recontextualisation process undertaken by the 'vocation' type of universities (see section 7.2.1).

For the University of Lyttelton, as the university which most closely resembles the 'doctrinal ideal type' of university, the QAA was promoting comparability that could potentially weaken the status of the perceived hierarchy of prestige in the minds of the general public and students. It is unthinkable to a 'doctrinal' type of university that any external organisation could interfere in the general hierarchical ordering of the sector. It also suggests that the Agency is of no real value to the University of Lyttelton and 'doctrinal' type institutions more generally. This will be explored further in Chapter six.

In contrast, the quality professional at Merivale welcomed the QAA's role in providing a more level playing field/basis on which to judge institutions. This also provides the

opportunity to strengthen the position of similar ‘vocational’ type institutions which normally hold a position lower in the perceived hierarchy of prestige than the ‘doctrinal’ or ‘secular ideal’ type of university. In this context the QAA might be considered to be an ‘arbiter’ ensuring fair play.

The senior manager from the same university, however, suggested that the QAA reinforced the differentiation within the perceived higher education hierarchy of prestige by how the Agency and review teams treated universities and the subsequent review reports based on their pre-existing reputations.

‘...so if you took all the names off and you went back over the QAA reports and you tried to categorise the nature of the particular recommendation, you would find that certain things would be treated differently... there are things which appear to be, you know, really quite serious which don’t seem to be given necessarily the same profile in the recommendations’

[Senior manager, University of Merivale]

The contrasting views in the data between the senior managers appear to suggest a link between how respondents construct the QAA and the strength of institutional reputation. Those in the university which most closely represents the ‘doctrinal ideal type’ perceive the QAA as again misrepresenting the hierarchy. The ‘vocational ideal types’ conclude that the Agency perpetuates the perceived hierarchy of status by the way its review teams are put together and operate. Both views are potentially damaging to how the independence of the QAA is viewed by the PRF, the ORF and the public. As noted in Chapter three such perceptions can lead to the Agency of being accused of failing to do its job. Such views can also inhibit the maturation and refinement of the quality assurance system in England because they preclude the universities from considering anything other than their own self interests.

Only one respondent from the QAA mentioned comparability of standards, noting that due to the diversity of universities in the sector and a broader range of students studying

for higher education awards, there needs to be *'a more multifarious approach to standards and what's expected of people and I don't know how QAA can effectively monitor and manage that'* [Assistant Director (a)]. This point links to forthcoming section 5.2.1 which discusses the notion of the QAA developing a 'science' of quality assurance. The implications for the QAA as it moves towards a common review method are discussed in the concluding chapter.

5.1.3 Protecting autonomy

The majority of the QAA respondents supported whole-heartedly the notion that the Agency should operate in such a way that protects the autonomy of the universities. The two respondents who did not, called for the QAA to be more inspectoral in its approach. Such views appear to be based on personal opinion rather than on another external factor.

The QAA was deemed to protect autonomy in two ways. Firstly, it provides the external reference points that are structured in such a way as to provide a series of resources which senior academic managers and quality professionals can recontextualise into their own institutional settings to safeguard their own academic standards and manage their own improvement activities.

'...the QAA has supplied a kind of structure to it [quality assurance] and not determining what has to be taught and how it has to be taught and how it has to be quality assured. It has given us tools.... But it remains within the realm of the institution to fill that space with our own interpretation of that.'

[Quality professional, University of Merivale]

'We're in a situation where at the moment the QAA lays down its precepts for how things should operate and the university says alright the QAA says we've got to do it like this, this is how we interpret this, this is what the university's approach is to these things and everybody in the university has to do it... So it's difficult to see how you get evolution at school level.'

[Academic (manager), University of Opawa]

These two quotations exemplify the core of this theme: the importance of the PRF operating without or with only minimal interference from the ORF. Retaining ownership of its internal quality assurance processes and procedures and, therefore, the recontextualising and evaluative rules of the pedagogic device is essential, however there might be disagreement within the PRF between the quality professionals and academics about the nature of the quality assurance processes themselves and their influence on pedagogic practice (see section 7.2.2).

Secondly, the Agency provides the means to test the universities and what they are doing to protect these standards and promote enhancement. At the time the interviews were conducted the QAA did not directly assess the standards within institutions such as the quality of teaching. Rather it assessed an institution's '*management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers and the quality of the learning opportunities available to students*' (QAA 2009d, p5). Responsibility for academic standards and quality therefore lies squarely with the higher education providers with degree awarding powers (Raban and Cairns, 2013, p113).

'I think QAA does a job of promoting the way in which institutions do that [safeguarding quality and standards] because we don't do it. We make sure institutions do it and that, I suppose, is a subtle distinction.'

[Assistant Director (d)]

Another QAA respondent took this further by emphasising the importance of the Agency looking at and assessing institutions in the context of that institution. What Brown (2013, p425) and Raban and Cairns (2014, p114) refer to as a 'fitness for purpose' approach;

'In the context of this institution, in the context of the type of students [they have] and in the context of their ethos and the mission statement and everything else that they tell you, now is what they're doing appropriate?' And that can be quite different from one institution to another.'

[Assistant Director (l)]

This quotation suggests that due to this variety the QAA is justified in its role in recontextualising the policy directives from the ORF into structures and guidance which it can accommodate for this.

Peer referenced

Another means of respecting the autonomy of the PRF identified by the majority of respondents from across the universities and the QAA was its use of the expertise of academic peers to develop materials for the PRF and in its review methods. This approach was seen as the only way to achieve legitimacy for the Agency and its messages because it is the PRF developing the materials that have the potential to influence the recontextualising rules of the pedagogic device and therefore pedagogic practice.

'It's something, you know, for the people by the people and in that sense the definitions and the rules and the parameters which it seeks to put into place, are ones which collaboratively the Sector has defined for itself and not ones which have been placed upon it by external or government environments.'

[Senior manager, University of Merivale]

'I can see that [subject benchmark statements] are produced very much in consultation with academics and for the use of academics.... academics speaking to academics.'

[Academic (quality), University of Merivale]

'The reason subject benchmarks have any status, any validity is because it is something that emerges from the academic community, you know, the FHEQ, and all the parts of the academic infrastructure. It wouldn't if it was some kind of external imposition in that sense, it wouldn't actually have that kind of authority.'

[Quality professional, University of Lyttelton]

For the QAA respondents it was the only means of working that would get any results and allow the Agency to achieve its mandate as set out by the Dearing report (see Chapter two) and meet its contract with the HEFCE. Three QAA respondents also spoke of the QAA needing to make sure that it kept the sector on side to ensure that the

universities agreed to release staff to act as peer reviewers and to contribute to the developments, working groups and discussion events.

It also enabled the Agency to build trust/working relationships (albeit to different degrees) with the universities, which safeguards the QAA's own position, given the ability of the more powerful universities through their mission groups to by-pass the Agency and lobby government directly (as seen in Chapter three) (Filippakou and Tapper, 2015, p3). This, therefore might limit the QAA in the degree and nature of recontextualisation it can undertake because it must consider the views of the PRF.

The QAA respondents also noted the importance of the mutuality with the PRF in the development processes:

'I'm sure there's been a massive rise of awareness of the importance of quality assurance, I have no doubt about that... and that's in a large part, I'm sure, due to the work that QAA has done and that's probably partly due to the way we work, we're always using people from the sector, so there's a kind of two way thing going on all the time... I think originally we were regarded with that kind of "you're the police and we're the people that you're policing", but I think more and more over time, the people that work very closely with us, perceive us more as a collegiate body, and one that they can work with and share issues with.'

[Assistant Director (b)]

'...most of the academics who took part in those exercises... most of them came away saying "we've never done that before, we've never actually sat down and said what does it mean to have a degree in history in the UK". So they actually found it useful, so there was always a sense of working with the sector and always a sense of trust... We built a lot of bridges with the sector.'

[Assistant Director (k)]

The latter quotation is interesting because subject benchmark statements are potentially a very controversial development for the Agency. A subject benchmark statement describes what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and defines the abilities and skills needed by graduates in order to develop understanding or competence in that subject. In doing so the statements set out the expected standards of degrees in that

discipline (QAA, 2011c). The benchmark statements could therefore be perceived as a direct attack on the PRF and the control of the recontextualisation and evaluative rules of the pedagogic device: professionals being told what to do. Indeed, Morley (2003, p44) suggests that benchmark statements are strengthening discipline classifications and represent a *'positivistic concept of knowledge based on objective truths to be communicated, memorized and measured.'* The question is the degree to which it is the PRF who is determining those 'truths.

The quotation also suggests another important perspective to this, namely that subject benchmark statements also provide a voice for academics and their disciplines. It was notable during my time at the QAA that an increasing number of subjects, which Bernstein (1996, p65) would have described as regions, wanted to have their own benchmark statement as this was seen to give them a voice and credibility within the higher education system. In the end the QAA had to establish criteria⁷¹ and a procedure to assess eligibility for a statement, in part for resource reasons.

One academic noted, however, that because the development process required consensus about the content of the benchmark statement it had to accommodate most elements relevant to a discipline, which most institutions would be comfortable that they were doing already. The respondent did not decry the benchmark statements and valued the opportunity for academics to consider what they wanted the discipline to look like, but felt that it could be more challenging.

'I think from the way I read this document, it represents academic common sense and rigour. I think that's good. I don't see anything where an academic in their right mind would have to disagree... I don't want to ridicule it, but some of the advice is so common sense it's like you need to show four out of five vital signs and well who would argue with that... I do see areas where it might be more stretching than others, to make sure that this is actually built on.'

[Academic (manager), University of Opawa]

⁷¹ The recognition scheme for subject benchmark statements (see <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=190#.VWyGfWlwZf0>)

Turning to the use of peers in the QAA review methods, the majority of respondents across the universities and the QAA considered the practice to be beneficial. Two respondents, one each from the University of Merivale and University of Opawa, however warned that the use of academic peers in this context could lead to a '*cultural dissonance*'. It was suggested that reviewers from very different institutions often '*simply don't get how an institution works*' [Quality professional, University of Opawa]. An example was offered where a review team failed to hear what was being said to them by the staff they were meeting because the team was following a particular line in their agenda: '*they [the reviewers] got their teeth into something and what I was going to be talking about was irrelevant.*' [Academic (manager), University of Merivale]. In Bernstein's terms this would suggest that there are multiple groupings within the PRF which are status bound and linked to the perceived hierarchy of prestige. This will be seen in the next chapter when I discuss the recontextualising process undertaken by the three universities along institutional lines and the 'ideal type' that the universities most closely resemble (see section 7.2).

5.2 Structural Engineer

In this theme three aspects were identified from the analysis of the data: the 'science' of quality assurance, the changing shape of universities, and shifting power relations.

5.2.1 The 'science' of quality assurance

The majority of respondents in the QAA and all three senior university managers talked of the Agency's role in raising awareness of quality assurance within the sector, and demonstrating the importance of having a formal and systematic approach to assuring academic standards. Two QAA respondents described the QAA as developing a '*science of quality assurance*' [Assistant Director (b), Former Chief Executive]. The

term 'science' is interesting because it suggests that the Agency has developed some form of objective technologies with which universities can develop their own solutions to their particular issues, appropriate to their own context. Two senior managers at the Universities of Opawa and Lyttelton supported this notion by suggesting that the QAA had provided universities with a lexicon with which to discuss quality assurance in local settings and across the higher education sector as a whole.

'It's produced an almost common language and I think that's incredibly important. I don't think the language is all always very easy, but I think it has produced a common vocabulary about which we can talk about things ... it confines an area so that we can manage it and work within it and develop it.'

[Senior manager, University of Opawa]

In this context the QAA might be considered to be a facilitator supporting the institutions in developing and operating their own quality assurance mechanisms. What the Agency is doing, as noted in section 5.1.3 above, is operating in a manner that respects the autonomy of the university and their right to set and maintain academic standards. However, in providing the framework within which to work, the Agency is creating a form of boundary within which the PRF must operate in relation to teaching and learning. Although this framework is devised by the PRF, we have already seen from the data that there is disagreement within and across the PRF based on a series of different vested interests, and that it is the QAA which mediates these as well as the requirements of the ORF and its agents (see section 5.1.2).

Eight of the respondents from the QAA and the senior managers at the Universities of Opawa and Merivale spoke of how the Agency, through its reference points and reviews, had enabled/encouraged universities (and subject disciplines in the context of subject benchmark statements) to think about how they do things and why.

'Most institutions have thought much more carefully about the way in which it's securing its standards... its teaching and learning, [and]...its supporting processes. I'm not saying that it's one hundred per cent in every institution... but what it has done is put that [academic standards]

firmly on the agenda and provided the opportunity for the really rogue areas, that have gone unnoticed for decades, to be rooted out.'

[Assistant Director (I)]

'I think it's [the QAA] been constructive. I think it's provided a vehicle for quite substantial and serious self-criticism, and development of processes which you know have clearly been to the benefit of students.'

[Quality professional, University of Opawa]

Interestingly a similar view again was noted by the Students' Union sabbatical officer at the University of Opawa, when she said that:

'From my perspective their [the QAA] role is to challenge higher education institutions, but also kind of encourage them to really look at the different kinds of elements of an institution and develop it... I see that they're [the QAA] the driving force behind that.'

[Students' Union sabbatical officer, University of Opawa]

Again this suggests the existence of a particular quality culture within the universities, which is spread through involvement with the internal quality assurance processes and particularly institutional level committees.

Drawing on personal experience of working in a university, one respondent reflected on the impact of Institutional Audit and guidance materials:

'...the first time institutional audit happened it galvanised the institution to produce and draw together and, perhaps for the first time, explain back to itself as an organisation what it is doing in all these areas.'

[Chief Executive of the QAA, interview 1]

However, with the 'science' has come a very specialist and, according to the senior managers at Opawa and Lyttelton, arcane language which is difficult to understand for anyone not directly engaged with institutional level quality assurance. In this context, the specialist language which Bernstein conceptualises, perpetuates the need for the Agency to create/modify and explain the language to the universities; it continues the

need for the employment of quality assurance professionals in the universities. In turn this has changed the power relations in the institutions (see section 5.2.3), but this specialist language can be of benefit to the universities and review teams; it allows for more fulsome criticisms or advice to be given in the published reports while minimising what can be used by the media at the expense of the university. This is a position few peer reviewers, as members of the PRF, would wish to place an institution in.

So while universities can recontextualise the QAA's messages/guidance into their own processes and therefore control the recontextualising rules of the pedagogic device, in reality there is pressure to adopt the Agency's language in some instances. This tends to be the case in universities further down the perceived hierarchy of prestige. Morley (2003), Coffield, (2006) and Filippakou and Tapper (2010, p480) suggest a broader impact noting that the QAA's specialised discourse has meant that words which would not normally be used in higher education have become commonplace.

The downside of using this specialist language is that it is unintelligible to the majority of the public and politicians, leading to possible accusations of collusion between the Agency and the universities.

'...any specialised activity quality assurance has developed its own terminology which is very meaningful to people within QAA and the quality officers and PVCs within institutions, but have we found a language that we can engage the public with, I'm not sure that that's happened.'

[Chief Executive of the QAA, interview 1]

In relation to the 'science' of quality assurance impacting on academics it was clear from the interviews with the majority of the academic staff and the Students' Union sabbatical officers that their knowledge of the QAA was relatively limited. Even those who were or had previously been engaged centrally or at faculty/department level with quality and standards described the Agency as a *'mysterious entity...[that] influences my*

life through the university's procedures rather than directly' [Academic (quality), University of Merivale]. Another conclusion was that on a day-to-day basis academics do not really consider the QAA at all.

'I think the majority view amongst academics is almost certainly "pppffttt" and that's about the best expression I can give to it.'

[Academic (manager), University of Opawa]

Two of the Students' Union sabbatical officers queried whether students needed to know about the QAA, suggesting that students considered quality assurance to be the responsibility of their respective universities:

'There is really no reason, in my opinion, why they [students] need to be told about the QAA...it's done behind the scenes and that's purely because students might not really understand the processes and [also] because in some cases they might just not even really care. They just want to come and get their degree and go.'

[Students' Union sabbatical officer, Merivale University]

Another officer suggested that if the QAA were to use language that was more understandable to students then there might be more engagement and a better understanding.

'I think if you said quality assurance to the majority of students they'd look at you with a fairly bemused expression. If you said something like value for money or quality of teaching then you'd all of a sudden hear them say "oh, actually yeah, that is a massive problem at the moment" [the problem being student contact hours].'

[Students' Union sabbatical officer, University of Opawa]

Similarly, several QAA respondents noted a lack of understanding about or disregard for the QAA amongst academics:

'...there's a lack of understanding at departmental, subject or individual level... I have met individuals who just don't really understand what the QAA is. Their view of the QAA is what they read in the Times Higher and that would be their only real engagement.'

[Assistant Director (e)]

'...you take a slice through any university, you've got people who are very comfortable with what QAA is trying to deliver, who accept that the benefits outweigh the effort... and they typically are members of the quality assurance committee at most institutions. You'll also have people who do not see the benefit of systems, whether it be QAA or university systems, who just see all this just as an overhead, and if you didn't have all this overhead think how much more you could actually do as an academic!'

[Assistant Director (I)]

One explanation provided by two QAA respondents was that while subject level review was not welcomed by many academics⁷² and had its failings, it brought external scrutiny and public comment home to academics (whether it brought quality assurance home too is another matter). With a move from subject level to institutional level review in 2001, two QAA respondents and one academic noted an increasing dislocation between individual academics and the Agency.

A number of the academics interviewed spoke of their colleagues still viewing the QAA negatively as a hindrance to academic freedom through the bureaucratisation of teaching and learning; a view that was also described by three QAA respondents when talking about academic friends or former colleagues.

'...what these kind of external audit and assurance processes have done is produced a more instrumental approach to education and that is definitely at odds with the academic values of some people who would see it as a more organic process, one that requires the building of personal relationships, one that is more of a holistic process and not one that can be broken down into a series of outcomes and benchmarks and all the rest of it.'

[Academic (manager), University of Lyttelton]

'I would very much guess that 95 per cent of my colleagues would say "I much rather replace all of this time spent QAing with research activity, because I'm not doing anything different as a result of doing the QAing" and maybe that's an important point. The question is how much are we doing things differently as result of the QA that goes on? I don't know what the answer is to that. I don't know how to measure it.'

[Academic (manager), University of Opawa]

⁷² Some academics welcomed subject review as a means of giving a voice to their discipline area within their university (personal communication, a former QAA colleague, 2015).

It is interesting that the second quotation only refers to research and not teaching as a preferred alternative to undertaking quality assurance activities. This might be expected as the University of Opawa most closely resembles the ‘secular’ university, which places significant emphasis on research as a legitimate activity. Yet, as seen in Chapter six the senior manager of the same university described how the QAA had helped the university to promote the value of teaching within the institution. This is an interesting example of the dislocation between the different elements within the PRF in the priorities of each.

The tensions between quality assurance processes and academic pedagogic practice seen in the first quotation above, was also highlighted by the quality professional at the University of Opawa when he spoke of the difficulty in designing sufficiently dynamic and sophisticated quality processes and procedures to accommodate the fact that good teaching involves relationships. It involves risk taking and a high degree of personal engagement which cannot be easily programmed. This too was reflected by an academic at the same institution when he noted that even after the QAA’s guidance had been recontextualised into the university’s setting, the subsequent quality assurance procedures left little scope for evolution in pedagogic practice at departmental level. In Bernstein’s terms this suggests that although in theory the PRF retain control of the recontextualising rules of the pedagogic device, the recontextualisation process is bounded/influenced by the QAA guidance and how that is recontextualised into internal quality assurance processes. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter six.

5.2.2 Changing the shape of the universities

One area where the QAA might be described as being a structural engineer is in reshaping the internal structures of a number of universities. Two QAA respondents and four from the universities, including the senior manager at the University of Opawa spoke about how the QAA had brought many of the pre-1992 universities more closely

in line with the post-1992 ‘vocational’ institutions in terms of their quality assurance structures.

‘The pre-92s have been transformed and that’s how they’ve become much more like the post-92s so I think we’ve seen a degree of convergence there and QAA affects that.’

[Senior manager, University of Opawa]

‘QAA has moved institutions, especially in some of the groupings of universities, from informal approaches to quality and standards to explicit approaches.’

[Former Chief Executive of the QAA]

These quotations provide clear examples of how the Agency, in Bernstein’s terms, has taken forward the ORF’s ideology for greater institutional accountability and standardisation in relation to quality assurance. The data from the analysis confirms that the QAA has been ‘successful’ in doing this, leading to greater convergence in the sector (Filippakou and Tapper, 2012, p109). This is interesting given the strength of some of the universities as autonomous bodies. I would suggest that there must have been a degree of cooperation particularly by the pre-1992 universities for this to have occurred. But the question is at what level within the university did the compliance take place and why? Unfortunately the data did not help me here explicitly, but it is possible to suggest some reasons – for example the convergence might have been a result of a natural drift as external quality assurance under the HEQC/HEFCE and then the QAA matured and the universities found the most appropriate structures to operate; or as a *quid pro quo* for the move from subject level to institutional level review, or as hinted at by the data as a consequence of changing power relations within universities as a result of the development of external quality assurance. Such reasons are in addition to those instigated by the introduction of managerialism into the higher education sector, as outlined earlier in Chapter two. The consequent changing power relations will be discussed further in the following section.

5.2.3 Changing power relations in the universities

The shift in power relations within the universities has been identified by researchers such as Jackson (1997, p170) and Newton (2010, p53). They note the establishment of two types of quality managers and leaders whose roles might be categorised as either ‘change heroes’ or ‘passive victims’. The former Chief Executive of the QAA also spoke of a change in the internal power relationships between academics and administrators in institutions that occurred because of the introduction of external quality assurance and the work of the QAA. It was suggested that this was because an industry for quality and standards had emerged where administrators had taken on the mantle of quality experts in order to protect academics against the burden of quality assurance and to protect the institutions as a whole.

‘When I started, there weren’t many people in charge of quality and standards and in a way I regret that an industry has emerged. My own personal vision was always of academics taking personal responsibility for quality and standards and developing their sense of a collective responsibility. A collective approach which would have been grass roots inspired and bottom-up in its pathways, so that the academics would have taken this in hand and then would have created their own structures which would have reflected national good practice... I think it was largely because of the very high stakes of TQA and the insistence of institutions that they should do well in them, that a devil’s pact was essentially forged between the administrators and the academics, by which administrators would essentially keep them [the QAA] off their backs if they did as they were told, and the academics on the whole bought into that I think. So that gave immense power to quality experts, to the quality assurance units... and that power which may have been assumed in order to protect the institutions as a whole has in the end, in many institutions, not invariably all, but in many has ended up being a major controlling factor which constrains... academic independence and action.’

[Former Chief Executive of the QAA]

This quotation is interesting because it talks of a time before the QAA and about its predecessor bodies and the AAU in particular. The AAU, as I set out in Chapter two, was set up by the universities themselves to divert the threat of more direct government intervention to promote institutional accountability. The quotation suggests that the PRF

failed to grasp the opportunity it had at the time to control the nature of quality assurance more fully. This might be for a number of reasons, for example because of the diversity of interests at all levels with the PRF as suggested by Bernstein (1990, p198) and Singh (2002, p577); or because, at the time, undertaking research was of far more significance than teaching and learning across these universities. It was easier to hand over responsibility to somebody else, such as the quality professionals rather than have to work with other academics within the PRF to develop a set of agreed principles to guide quality assurance in the university or the higher education sector more broadly.

As one of the academic members of staff from the University of Lyttelton suggested, the diverse interests of vice-chancellors and academics meant that the PRF could not work collectively to articulate an alternative to the external quality assurance framework developed by AAU, HEQC and the QAA. A view echoed by Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2015, p619).

'...so we've all acquiesced in a sense, some positively, enthusiastically, and some less so in bringing this [the QAA external review] on ourselves and I think the sector has been unable to articulate an alternative professional basis for quality assurance unlike, for example the BMA [British Medical Association]. So we don't have the equivalent, you know, something like the BMA which has more authority.'

[Academic (manager), University of Lyttelton]

It is interesting that the respondent did not associate the sector's representative bodies, UUK and GuildHE, with presenting the views of academics as a profession, only those of the vice-chancellors which were deemed to be at odds with the PRF.

I would suggest that the development of central quality assurance professionals resulted from change in the management structures in the majority of the universities and from the importance placed on gaining a positive outcome of an external quality assurance review. This was particularly true when the review was at subject level; the senior management did not trust the academics to take the quality agenda forward at the

necessary speed. I suspect this is a view still held by a number of universities across the current higher education sector, where the outcome of an institutional review is less predictable, or where the status/reputation of the university is less secure. In this context it was 'safer' for the university to develop quality specialists who could understand and recontextualise the QAA's messages into the local context in preparation for external review. It also suited the new ideology of senior managers in the university to develop such specialists and weaken the PRF.

It is not surprising therefore, that the data from the analysis confirmed that academics (and the Students' Union sabbatical officers) saw the QAA as a mysterious entity. I would suggest that while the QAA's way of working respects the autonomy of the sector, it perpetuates the power relations in the universities and the need for specialist quality assurance professionals. The implications of this for the QAA and for the quality professional are discussed further in the concluding chapter.

5.3 Summary

In this chapter I have begun to set out how the role of the QAA is understood across and within the three universities (research question one). Overall there was considerable consensus in views across all universities and the QAA in a number of areas: the legitimate role of the Agency in safeguarding academic standards, protecting the autonomy of universities and the benefits and appropriateness of the QAA's peer referenced way of working. Differentiation of views between the universities appeared to be linked broadly to university type, although the views of the academics and students from all the universities are broadly similar and relatively limited in the context of the QAA.

Within the QAA, the relatively limited differentiation in views across the Agency appears initially to be based on length of service with the Agency and/or the

employment history of that individual, and the culture of the institution in which they had worked.

In the next chapter I continue to discuss two more of the themes arising from the analysis of the data: 'mission creep' and perceptions before reality.

CHAPTER SIX EMPIRICAL FINDINGS II: EXTENDING ROLES AND MISUNDERSTANDING

6.0 Introduction

In this second empirical chapter I consider the two final themes in respect of how the universities view the QAA's role: 'mission creep' and 'perceptions before reality'. The first discusses the scope of the QAA's work; the second the degree of mutuality between the QAA and the universities and the challenges that this brings.

6.1 'Mission Creep'

Analysis of the data suggests that the universities and some members of the QAA consider that the Agency is extending its role into areas where it does not belong. While there was no consensus amongst the respondents about which parts of the QAA's work were outwith its mandate, two aspects received the most comment: the QAA's enhancement activities and its work in relation to students.

While the senior managers and quality professionals from the University of Merivale and University of Opawa acknowledged that there were historical reasons why the QAA had become involved in a broad range of activities, respondents from the University of Lyttelton saw it as the QAA pursuing a '*bureaucratic expansionist strategy*' [Senior manager, University of Lyttelton] albeit understandable in the current political landscape of higher education in England.

In this context the University of Lyttelton identified the QAA firmly as an agent of the ORF establishing a broader, or perhaps more secure, power base. It was notable that the senior manager went on to acknowledge the difficult position the Agency was in, working to an unclear Government policy.

'...it's unfair to blame the Agency because actually the Government itself is unclear about what higher education is in the United Kingdom and without an answer to that ... it's certainly asking a lot of the QAA to be able to work out what sort of watchdog it should be.'

[Senior manager, University of Lyttelton]

This positioning is in keeping with the identification of the University as most closely resembling the 'doctrinal ideal type' of university.

In the context of a lack of policy direction from Government for the regulation of higher education, four respondents from the QAA spoke of the Agency's agenda often being added to in order to respond to changes in government policy with little understanding of the original purpose of the Agency.

'...our elected representatives have only the sketchiest ideas of how higher education is organised and were making claims or indicating expectations which apart from being illegal, are just not achievable.'

[Former Chief Executive of the QAA]

These two quotations highlight the importance of the Agency's recontextualising such policy directives into something which ensures that the HEFCE meets its statutory responsibility for assuring the quality of the higher education provision it funds, so that the Agency meets its contractual obligations.

6.1.1 The debate about enhancement

In the universities and the QAA, concerns were raised about the Agency's involvement in enhancement activities. While both acknowledge that supporting improvement in the universities has always been in the Agency's mission/remit, the formalisation of the

concept of 'enhancement'⁷³ in its guidance, through specific activities, and assessed in its review methods was seen for some respondents to be 'mission creep'.

Respondents from the University of Lyttelton considered the QAA's involvement with quality enhancement to be ill-conceived and a significant diversion from its regulatory function. The senior manager at the University of Lyttelton was particularly emphatic in his view that quality enhancement was the sole responsibility of the universities themselves as independent autonomous bodies.

'...it [the QAA] is in areas it shouldn't be and I see no role for the QAA in quality enhancement, none! You know, it's mission creep and in my view it damages what should be the core mission which is around quality and standards.'

[Senior manager, University of Lyttelton]

A view echoed by one academic member of staff at the University of Otago:

'There's a difference between assurance and enhancement and some of my colleagues would doubtless say that there should be something in there about enhancing education and making it better. I actually think, if I'm honest, I think that goes beyond what the remit of the Agency should be.'

[Academic (manager), University of Otago]

Similarly in the Agency, five respondents expressed concern and suggested that elements of the enhancement role would be better done by the Higher Education Academy, or should be left to the universities themselves. This included one respondent who worked in the department with responsibility for such work.

'I would like the DEG [QAA's Development and Enhancement Group], in whatever form it would be, to lose the term 'enhancement', because I don't think we do enhancement on a significant level. I think we pay lip service to it and I don't think institutions are expecting us to do enhancement.'

[Assistant Director (m)]

⁷³ The QAA defines enhancement as 'Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities' (QAA, 2014b).

Another Assistant Director noted:

'I don't buy into the enhancement thing, I think that's emperor's new clothes, and I don't think it's our job to contribute to enhancement, regardless of the rhetoric in Scotland. That's the responsibility of the universities. But actually, no one's in it to make things worse, so it's just giving a name to what everybody's been doing or should have been doing over time.'

[Assistant Director (c)]

In Bernstein's terms the respondents above see that the QAA is encroaching on the responsibilities of the PRF and only the agent of the PRF, such as the Higher Education Academy should be providing information to it because only the PRF can legitimately interpret the data arising from the Institutional Audit reports. If the QAA does that analysis there is a chance that the Agency might recontextualise the outcomes to convey particular messages.

In contrast, an equal number of respondents from the QAA and the universities of Merivale and Opawa considered that the Agency had a legitimate role in sharing intelligence identified through its review methods across the sector. This was both in terms of good practice, as well as activity that had the potential to put academic standards and reputation at risk. In this context the Agency's role was described as one of supporting the development of higher education providers while protecting the sector's reputation.

'The main thing is the basic level of assurances that we provide and then what flows from that is the finer detail of the messages that help either to improve things within a particular institution or across the piece.'

[Assistant Director (j)]

'I would also hope that it [the QAA] had a role in improvement, not just correcting failures or lax institutions, but also by propagating good practice.'

[Chair of the Board]

'Beyond that, I think it's important that QAA should use the resources that it has, or the resource it generates through other parts of its work, to assist institutions... to provide them with examples of good practice, to give them warnings when things look as if they might be going wrong either for themselves or more broadly across the sector.'

[Former Chief Executive of the QAA]

For the universities of Merivale and Opawa, the QAA's role in enhancement might be where the senior managers appropriate the QAA in order to change aspects of university practice, for example in giving teaching a higher priority/status within the University, as in the case of Opawa. Such appropriation of the Agency will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Researchers such as Raban (2007, p79-80) have also suggested that the QAA's enhancement work is the more acceptable part of its role which balances out its more regulatory function. Filippakou, Salter and Tapper (2010, p551) suggests that quality enhancement is part of the ORF's strategy of '*seduction*' to secure the PRF's cooperation. In the future such enhancement activities might maintain some form of engagement within the more risk-based approach to external review where institutions demonstrating 'sound' practice are reviewed less frequently. Although Newton (2010, p52) suggests that the '*Cinderella*' of enhancement will never get to the '*grand ball*' and is in reality a '*very messy business*' so might not be the seductive enterprise it is sometimes advertised as.

6.1.2 Adopting of the student agenda

The issue of 'mission creep' was also raised in relation to the QAA's role in promoting greater student involvement in internal and external quality assurance, as well as providing more information for students – which I have loosely termed the student agenda.

As can be seen from the quotations below, the deal that students receive while at university has always been central to the work of the Agency, but what has changed since 2009 as the Government has worked towards changing the funding structure for higher education (see Chapter three) is the student agenda coming more to the fore within the Agency.

'The first [function] is validation...Most of the HEIs clearly receive public money and the few that don't, get student money, and it's important that what they do is validated, so the public and the students can be assured of the quality of the offer which they are getting.'

[Chair of the Board]

'The role of the QAA is, through its review work, to ensure that standards or public assurance in the standards is being met and also that students are getting a good deal.'

[Assistant Director (e)]

For the PRF this was a matter of concern because students were seen to be very much the responsibility of the universities. The senior manager and the quality professional at the University of Opawa summed up the views of all the universities when they questioned the QAA's active appropriation of the student (as consumer) agenda as well as the Agency's role in relation to representing the student voice.

'I don't think we want to see the QAA as being the means by which students' voices are projected onto higher education.'

[Senior manager, University of Opawa]

*'I think capturing the voice of students is hugely difficult. There are so many of them, they're so various and the danger is that actually QAA ends up talking to people who are proxies for students, and who I guess quite quickly and inevitably become a different sort of establishment quite distinct from the student body.... I think that the universities may well have a better appreciation of what **real** students want.'*

[Quality professional, University of Opawa]

The data from the analysis suggest the PRF not only considers that the QAA is working outside its remit in taking forward the student agenda, but that the Agency is at risk of

being misappropriated by a particular group of students or representative body to the cost of the PRF. It can be seen as the ORF, through the QAA as its agent, telling the PRF what to do: in this case how they must engage with students. Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2015, p620) suggest that the QAA's is promulgating the Government's market-oriented discourse which is detrimental to the position of the PRF and more particularly the development of academic knowledge by students.

If this is considered against the initial analysis of the QAA's work in Chapter three, it is feasible that the PRF considers the QAA to be providing students with the tools (through its guidance and training) to critique the universities by using the vocabulary and processes of quality assurance. All the interviews with the Students' Union sabbatical officers showed that they considered the National Student Survey (NSS) to be a powerful lever to use with the universities to instigate change.

'I think it's had a massive effect... For example, last year the [NSS] scores for the library were really, really low and since then the library has been mentioned in pretty much every single committee that I've sat on this year...[including] senior management committee, whereas before it wasn't necessarily being discussed.... we've used it to our advantage at the Students' Union, the results let us make arguments for things.'

[Students' Union sabbatical officer, Opawa]

In this context additional involvement or even understanding of quality assurance could increase this further. In a sense, the QAA's work can be considered to be weakening the PRF's control over the recontextualising and evaluative rules of the pedagogic device. Not only that, but as seen in Chapter three, students have direct access to the Chief Executive of the QAA through the Agency's Sounding Board and membership of the Board of Directors.

It is interesting to note, however, that the Students' Union sabbatical officers considered the QAA's reports to be too complex and not effective to generate student change, with

one suggesting that Students' Unions and the NUS should take on more of a consumer protection role as fees increase.

'...one of the beauties of something like the NSS, and I'm sure this is why many people despise it, is its simplicity and the way in which someone can really just look at the outcomes easily. Now, QAA is a little bit more complex with some of the stuff it looks at, so the outcomes are more complex.'

[Students' Union sabbatical officer, University of Lyttelton]

One Assistant Director suggested that while the QAA has had a significant role in changing the ways in which students are perceived in relation to their own learning - from apprentices to co-producers - it might have only been a symptom of broader changes in higher education:

'By a long, long way the biggest single change must be students being treated as adults ...I think there is a notion of treating students as equal partners in their own learning is something which didn't exist previously and I think the quality movement has been fundamentally concerned with that. QAA has in once sense caused it, in another sense QAA is simply the symptom of the political wish which reflects a change in market conditions.'

[Assistant Director (a)]

The QAA's extended work in relation to students is a clear example of the Agency acting on behalf of the ORF in preparation for the changes to the way in which the higher education sector is funded and the broader marketisation of the sector.

While both the Chief Executives and the Chair of the Board saw the extension of the Agency's work in relation to students as a logical development; not all the Assistant Directors were convinced. Over half of them raised concerns about the degree to which the student agenda was beginning to dominate the thinking within the Agency and the practicality of greater student involvement in review methods in England. This was both in terms of the impact on a review method that was not designed to include student reviewers and the structures of the Agency to support students.

'That's the problem I have with the students, because it's adding them to a method that wasn't designed to include them. That involves a lot of compromise and I think it's high risk... And I think such bolt-ons are dangerous. It's like in the universities when you talk about the incremental changes to a course, by the end you're not doing what you started doing.'

[Assistant Director (c)]

One Assistant Director thought that review teams' findings might become sharper with the addition of a student member to the panel, as they would bring a fresh and more questioning approach to the review. He suspected, however, that the students might need to be *'reined in'* in relation to the nature of the recommendations made, because their expectations of the scope of Institutional Audit and what it can do might be unrealistic at first [Assistant Director (d)]. The Students' Union officers thought the inclusion of students on review teams was a positive development, but one was not sure whether the student reviewers would understand their role, or keep up with what was being discussed [Students' Union sabbatical officer, University of Opawa].

Four respondents suggested that the decision to have student reviewers was being *'pushed through'* by the QAA's Board, partly in response to Government policy, and partly because of the interests of the constituent members the Board was representing.

'.. the issue of student auditors was primarily driven by our own Board which of course in itself embodies lots of other interests, interest groups of institutions for example.'

[Assistant Director (h)]

'You know, the whole railroading of bloody students onto audit teams, not that I've got anything against that as such, but just the way that it was done.'

[Assistant Director (b)]

At the time there was a sense in the Agency that the Board was behaving more bullishly in response to the criticism raised against the universities and the Agency following the quality crisis of the summer 2008 and the fallout from that (see Chapter two). It is

interesting that one of the quality professionals interviewed described a ‘turf war’ taking place between the HEFCE, the representative bodies of higher education (Universities UK and GuildHE) and the QAA, during this time. The first two were defending their positions regarding their responsibilities for the quality of higher education in the light of the criticisms in the IUSSSC report. The respondent suggested that this was significantly undermining the QAA’s position.

‘...over the last twelve months or so... the last eighteen months shall we say, it does feel as though QAA has started to lose that [its independence]... HEFCE and UUK undermine its appearance of independence. I think that there probably needs to be a greater degree of independence in the way that it’s set up and the way that at Board level... everything that has happened over the last couple of years to me has just emphasised that.’

[Quality professional, University of Lyttelton]

While the discussion above demonstrates the difficult position in which the QAA finds itself in between the ORF and the PRF, it also demonstrates a number of other things. It exemplifies the contestation that can occur within any regulatory organisation where staff have an affiliation with those being regulated. It also shows how the Chief Executive of the QAA played a key role in leading the Agency in its new agenda. The current Chief Executive of the QAA came from UCAS in October 2009 with an established reputation for developing mechanisms that supported and focussed on students. His commitment to providing accessible information to students was evident in both of the interviews with him.

‘...in my experience of working with students in my current role, students don’t find that [the QAA’s] information naturally accessible. We’ve virtually given up at UCAS sending letters to students because they just don’t read them. Students are accessing information in different ways, arguably in bite size ways. They want to link to very specific enquiries about particularly institutions they may be thinking of studying at and I think there’s probably work that needs to be done on thinking about how the information that QAA generates can be conveyed more effectively to the student consumer if you like.’

[Chief Executive of the QAA, interview 1]

'It's absolutely certain that QAA's role has to be as a much more effective provider of information about the quality and standards in higher education, than it's been in the past. What we do, why we do it, and why it means that students in this incredibly and increasingly diverse sector can nevertheless be assured about the achievement of threshold standards and the mechanism for improvement...we've responded to that in part by creating a Director of Public Engagement and a Public Engagement Group, so we're making a very explicit statement that this is really of top table significance to us now.'

[Chief Executive of the QAA, interview 2]

As I suggested earlier in this section, in taking forward the Government's agenda regarding students, the QAA can be seen as an agent of the ORF. The current Chief Executive of the QAA was clear, however, that the Agency was *not* a government body and remained independent.

'In relation to the Government, I think it's right that it's not a direct relationship. We're not a government body and David Willets [Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills at the time of the interviews] has made that very clear...there are a number of safe guards all of which were intended to protect our independence and it would be wrong for an independent quality assurance agency to be controlled in any sense by the Government. I think that most people would agree on that as a principle of good quality assurance.'

Are we influenced by policy directions that the government take? Yes we are, and I think rightly so, because the Government are the elected representatives of the public whose interests we're meant to be safeguarding. So when the elected representatives move in a particular policy direction, it's only right that we should respond to that, while at the same time not hesitating to draw attention to difficulties that we might foresee from our own particular expertise.'

[Chief Executive of the QAA, interview 2]

Equally, he noted that the Agency did not support the call by the NUS President (at the time) for the QAA to take on a more consumer protectionist role preferring to '*move significantly toward reflecting student interests more centrally, than we do at the moment*'. Nor did he wish to lose '*the benefits we get through working with institutions*

to help them improve their quality'. However, he also warned against the Agency being dominated/directed by the sector *'So it's about maintaining that link with institutions, but not being controlled by institutions which I think is really important.'* [Chief Executive of the QAA, interview 2]

'...[we must be] constantly vigilant that we are maintaining an appropriate distance from the sector. I think key to that is actually going back and reflecting, as we have been doing over the last year, reflecting on that key line in our Mission which is about protecting the public interest. So that must always be our ultimate aim, and the relationship with the institutions reflects the fact that they themselves have responsibility for their own quality and standards, and we work with that and we respect it. But our job ultimately is to safeguard the public interest.'

[Chief Executive of the QAA, interview 2]

For those respondents who had worked with the QAA for a significant period of time there was a sense that the Agency was moving away from its original ethos and was putting its core business of institutional review at risk. It was losing its links with the sector and becoming further entrenched in the ORF as an agent of the Government. As two respondents stated:

'I think our position is changing.... even during the time of Subject Review and that whole programme of work right at the beginning of QAA when we developed the Academic Infrastructure, those were the hardest times, in the sense of being loathed by the sector, but nonetheless behind all that there was always a sense of working with the sector. I see that changing now. I hear the words "what's in it for us" a lot more often'

[Assistant Director (k)]

'From being a sector owned, sector focussed and sector directed activity organisation, we have moved to being one where the perceptions of the public, perceptions of politicians, the perceptions of students especially international students now have very considerable bearing on what we do and how we do it.'

[Former Chief Executive of the QAA]

Accompanying this perceived change in focus/positioning was, according to two Assistant Directors in the QAA, a **de-professionalisation** of the role of those managing

reviews, including fewer staff entering the Agency with experience of working in higher education. This is potentially risky, as one of the key sources of the QAA's authority identified by the respondents in the universities as well as the Agency is the expertise of those who work with the universities.

'.... but in order to do that [assure the public] effectively they need to have an empathy with the values of higher education. They need to have a sophisticated understanding of how higher education works and you know the delicacy of that organism.'

[Quality professional, University of Opawa]

It was also noted that the work of Assistant Directors was becoming more systematised and formulaic, leading to a change in the nature of the role and a reduction in the scope these staff had in using their own judgements.

What is apparent in the latter part of this section is the challenging position the Chief Executive of the QAA finds himself in, balancing the Agency's relationship with the PRF, the ORF and their agents, and more recently the representative body of students; while also contending with contestation within the Agency itself. The ability to lead the Agency while one or more groups are not convinced by the QAA's agenda is critical.

One respondent sums this up eloquently:

'I know Anthony McClaran has been trying to walk a tightrope really of trying to meet different requirements [re what the QAA does]while retaining the confidence of the institutions, but against huge pressure.'

[Senior manager, University of Opawa]

6.2 Mutuality and perceptions

So far, the thesis has provided a number of examples of the difficult position that the QAA is in between the PRF and the ORF. This next section discusses this in the light of the analysis of the data and the difficulties associated with perception and reality in this context.

6.2.1 Degree of mutuality

As discussed in Chapter three, the QAA is owned by the higher education sector, but funded by the Funding Councils and, specifically, the HEFCE in relation to England. For the majority of respondents this means that there is a degree of mutuality between the Agency and the PRF. How the extent of the mutuality is viewed by the different universities appears to be demarcated along institutional lines and the ‘ideal type’ the university most resembles.

The senior managers and quality professionals from the University of Merivale (‘vocational’) and the University of Opawa (‘secular’) place the Agency between the Government and the universities, acting as a buffer to mediate government policy initiatives where appropriate, and to enable the universities to have an input into their own regulation (see section 5.2.1). The senior manager at the University of Opawa suggests a sense of mutuality with the Agency: *‘It’s sort of mutual ownership, mutual authority. We all buy into a kind of club and it’s kind of good for most of us.’* The senior manager at Merivale takes this further by suggesting that the QAA is part of the sector particularly through its guardianship of the universities autonomy (see also section 5.1.3)

‘I see it as an agency of the sector and therefore because I see it as effectively as a form of manifestation of institutional autonomy and self-regulation in a community sense, then I see it as an honest broker and watch dog.’

[Senior manager, University of Merivale]

In this context the Agency was described by these respondents as being a conduit between the sector and the Government, skilled at looking towards and working with both parties in a *'Janus like function'* [Quality professional, University of Otago]. One face of Janus listens and considers the requirements of the ORF and its agents, while the other listens to the universities and respects the autonomy of the PRF. Both faces must then come together to translate the messages heard into guidance and reference materials, and review methods which *'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).

In contrast the senior manager and quality professional from the University of Lyttelton (which most closely resembles the 'doctrinal' university) saw the QAA as being an arm of government (the ORF), or moving towards that position, whose role is affected more *'by bureaucratic politics than by education itself'* [Senior manager, University of Lyttelton]. Interestingly, an academic from Lyttelton sees the QAA in more of the buffer role suggested by respondents from the University of Merivale and Otago, when he notes:

'I think we're increasingly seeing the government thinking it decides what some of those standards are. I think we probably need something between us and government otherwise government will just be deciding on policy and the next day we'll be implementing it. I guess that might well mean that the politicians think that the QAA slows down their implementation policy, gets in the way of, blocks, obfuscates, whatever.'

[Academic (quality), University of Lyttelton]

There was a similar mixture of views in relation to the position of the Agency within the QAA staff interviewed. For the majority there appears to be strong allegiances to the universities and the need to respect their autonomy in the way that the Agency functions. But there was an acknowledgment that, for contractual reasons, the Agency

takes forward specific elements of successive governments' agenda in relation to higher education. This includes embedding the concepts of 'quality enhancement', promoting students as co-producers within the quality assurance of higher education, and amending the criteria for degree awarding powers and University title in order to facilitate opening the sector to new providers⁷⁴. However, there were also examples where the Agency is able to advise the ORF not to go ahead with a particular development [Assistant Director (a)]. Remaining independent can often be difficult for the Agency. In one of the interviews with the current Chief Executive of the QAA, for example, he suggested that it was going to be a challenge to demonstrate that what is important for the Agency is assuring academic standards and quality irrespective of where the higher education provision is delivered.

'We've got a real challenge demonstrating very clearly that for us what matters fundamentally is quality, regardless of the nature of the institution that provides it. In other words, signalling that we are actually very much open to the contribution of the private sector.'

[Chief Executive of the QAA, interview 2]

It is possible, however, to see this openness towards the private sector as the Agency sanctioning government policy to expand the market and the Agency clearly aligning itself with the ORF. While that might very well be the case, it is also worth remembering that the Agency, in relation to its work in England, is contracted by the HEFCE and for pragmatic reasons will need to be 'open' to private providers in the context of having the structures, processes and procedures in place to regulate a more diverse higher education sector. Unfortunately, I did not probe that statement further in the interview. It does however suggest that there is a need to ensure that the Agency

⁷⁴ At the time of the data collection developments were in train to create assessment regimes for any provider, including private organisations, delivering higher education provision (i.e. at levels 4 and above of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland).

reflects the changing landscape of the higher education sector in England to safeguard, as best it can, its continuance.

If, however, the current Chief Executive's statement regarding the Agency not being controlled by the universities (see section 6.1.2) and the suggestion from some of the university respondents that the QAA is losing its independence are considered (see section 6.2.2), then it is feasible to suggest that the Agency has moved from its position under the former Chief Executive closer to the PRF, to a position closer to the ORF.

6.2.2 The challenges of mutuality

From the QAA's perspective there is a difficulty with this mutuality and the peer referenced way of working, as discussed in section 6.2.1 above, namely the regular accusations by the public and politicians that the Agency is too cosy with the sector. One respondent suggested that this was problematic because of the belief held by politicians that the Agency focuses too much on processes rather than outputs and that academic standards and quality can only be assessed if observed directly. I would suggest that this position demonstrates the continued lack of trust in the professionalism of academics established in the 1980s with the introduction of the ideology of managerialism to the higher education sector.

One respondent from the QAA suggested that the difficulty in convincing the public that the QAA was not a 'soft touch' was because of a general lack of understanding by the public about the nature and status of the higher education sector itself, let alone its relationship of mutuality with the Agency. For example, respondents spoke of a continued scepticism by the public about the large number of positive review reports that the Agency produced which do not conform to the expected bell shaped curve of frequency of positive and failing outcomes. But, as the former Chief Executive of the QAA noted, the majority of the public are not interested in the philosophy of quality or

the restrictions placed on the QAA because of the autonomous nature of higher education institutions, therefore misconceptions are inevitable. The Chair of the QAA's Board spoke of the boundaries imposed on the Agency.

'The only thing I think that doesn't seem to be generally appreciated is that QAA is after all imprisoned, if you like, in the structures and guidance imposed on it by its remit and by the Government. I think it's not generally realised that it's not a free agent able to invent a process all by itself.'

[Chair of the QAA Board]

In terms of trying to determine who was to blame for the lack of understanding by the politicians and public about the quality assurance of university provision, the senior managers and quality professionals identified two main sources: the universities themselves and the QAA.

The senior managers at the University of Otago and the University of Waikato and the quality professional from University of Canterbury suggested that the universities had failed to articulate clearly to the public and politicians how quality and standards are regulated in the sector and the QAA's role in that regulation. Nor had it conveyed that they were *'scared to death of QAA'* and a poor review outcome because of the disastrous implications for the institutions [Senior manager, University of Otago]. As a result the QAA was perceived by the public and the Government to be *'a soft touch'* [Senior manager, University of Otago] and too close to higher education to regulate higher education effectively.

In addition, the respondents considered that the universities had allowed their representative bodies (UUK and GuildHE) to become increasingly politicised, and allowed the diverse self-interests of vice-chancellors and mission groups to dilute the PRF's influence over the ORF so that the politicians were not hearing how the universities actually viewed the QAA or quality assurance, accurately. One senior

manager and a quality professional noted that as a result there was concern that the QAA's work was being increasingly directed by those outside the Agency, away from the original purposes of the Agency, and that the voice of the PRF was no longer contributing effectively to the QAA's work.

'...the purposes for which the QAA was established in the first place are being hijacked by various interests groups who have a very simplistic view of what universities do and I want to see the QAA remain independent... and that it doesn't become, if you like, a tool to beat higher education. Because I think the big problem with this is that the public will lose trust in institutions and that internationally we will damage ourselves.'

[Senior manager, University of Opawa]

'I don't know if this is the reality or not, but the way it felt to me, having the response to the consultation exercise [on a review method], was that it didn't really matter what anybody said there were political agendas here which meant that the QAA was being pushed around to fulfil them... it doesn't quite have the status, the standing that perhaps it should.'

[Quality professional, University of Lyttelton]

In contrast, the senior manager at University of Lyttelton blamed the QAA itself for the lack of understanding. He considered that the Agency's inability to communicate its role and purpose clearly to all but the smallest cadre of quality specialists, placed the Agency *'on a back foot in advancing the quality agenda'*. This along with the Agency's bureaucratic expansionist approach (see section 6.1), its self-perpetuating culture and its *'infinite capacity to write in gobbledegook'* meant that the Agency had created quite *'a toxic sort of environment'* in which the regulation of higher education was supposed to operate and evolve [Senior manager, University of Lyttelton].

Again in this section there appears to be differences within the PRF along institutional boundaries and variations in the 'ideal type' of university, with the 'doctrinal' university seeing the QAA as an arm of the ORF, and the other universities seeing the Agency in a more supportive role sitting between the ORF and the PRF, mediating. There is also the suggestion that the representative bodies of the PRF are taking forward a particular and

more politicised agenda potentially to the detriment of the wider PRF. It would have been interesting to have interviewed individuals from UUK and GuildHE to gain their perspective, or to have explored this issue more specifically with the QAA respondents, but this would have required returning to interview them again, which resources did not permit.

6.3 Summary

I have shown in the first two empirical chapters that the QAA is perceived to undertake a series of mediating roles between the various stakeholders in higher education. It also performs a complex and sophisticated form of recontextualising that has to be finely balanced in order to maintain some sort of effective function. It produces guidance and processes which are sufficiently acceptable to the universities to gain their cooperation, while still meeting the statutory responsibilities of the HEFCE. This recontextualisation process relies heavily on the negotiation skills of senior staff in the Agency to maintain the often fragile working relationships with the main stakeholders, which is prone to misunderstanding and myth.

What has become clear from the analysis of the data so far is that for the Agency to undertake its various roles effectively, it must be seen to retain a semblance of independence. It must be independent from the PRF, if it is to be seen to be safeguarding academic standards and quality in the eyes of the politicians, students and the public; independent too from the ORF, if it is to be seen to be respecting the autonomy of the universities. This in turn should enable the Agency to work more easily with the individual institution, mindful of both the PRF and the ORF if it is to have peace within its own staff.

The next and final empirical chapter considers the recontextualisation process that the universities undertake in establishing their relationship with the QAA and developing their internal quality processes and procedures.

CHAPTER SEVEN FINDINGS III: THE RECONTEXTUALISATION PROCESS

7.0 Introduction

This final empirical chapter looks at the recontextualisation process that takes place in the universities. I begin by highlighting five factors which appear, from the analysis of the QAA interviews, to influence how the Agency is perceived and recontextualised by the universities. I will then discuss how the universities of Lyttelton, Opawa and Merivale recontextualise the QAA and whether the factors suggested by the QAA respondents do have an influence over what the universities do in practice. At the end of this discussion about the recontextualisation process consideration will also be given to whether my suggestion, in Chapter three that there are two recontextualising sites within the PRF is correct.

7.1 Influences of the Recontextualisation Process

It appears that how a university recontextualises the QAA is inextricably linked to how that university perceives the Agency's role and both are influenced by a number of factors. These factors include: the perceived position of the institution in the higher education hierarchy of prestige; the nature of the students recruited; the institutional experience of delivering higher education; degree of risk the university is willing to carry; and the timing and nature of the last engagement with the QAA.

7.1.1 Position in the perceived hierarchy of prestige

Five QAA respondents suggested that the perceived position in the higher education sector's hierarchy affects institutional perception and engagement with the QAA. Historically those institutions positioned at or towards the top of the perceived hierarchy and with stronger reputations (the 'doctrinal' university type), were less inclined to engage with the Agency as they perceived there to be little benefit to them in doing so.

Two QAA respondents noted that more latterly this had improved and the QAA was now tolerated by such institutions, although engagement could be limited.

'I think most institutions accept QAA now for what it is and realise that things could be a lot worse. So even the Russell Group institutions will probably accept QAA for what it is... [although] some will basically have very little to do with us other than the bare minimum... Some institutions would accept us far more than that, they'd say actually there's a positive impact here and again that's a specific sort of institution.'

[Assistant Director (k)]

'I think what institutions think of QAA differs considerably at the PVC/DVC level, they very much see the Agency as, I wouldn't say a friend, but someone that helps them in doing their work and making those changes that the rest of the institution drag their feet over. It's not all institutions, because some have very particular views on the purpose of higher education which I think brings them into conflict with the role that we have.'

[Assistant Director (j)]

The mirror of this tolerance was the notion that there is **growing complacency** in respect of the QAA in certain universities. Three QAA respondents noted that generally institutions took the Institutional Audits seriously, a view echoed by the Students' Union sabbatical officers interviewed in the universities. However, seven QAA respondents described a growing complacency towards the QAA because institutions have got used to the work of the Agency. It was thought that the lack of negative outcomes from Institutional Audits had also contributed to this malaise. Two QAA respondents gave examples of how this complacency had manifested itself, particularly in the universities akin to the 'doctrinal' and 'secular ideal type' of universities. One described how responsibility for arranging the QAA reviews was being delegated to increasingly junior staff, a practice that would have been unheard of in the past. Another QAA respondent described how the reviews themselves were becoming a series of 'semi-scripted dramas' involving increased game playing between the review team and institution.

Three other QAA staff suggested that the views of the vice-chancellors differed between institutions; one suggested that most vice-chancellors recognised the need to provide some accountability for public funds and that the QAA had a role in doing this. However another suggested that there was evidence of some vice-chancellors disengaging from the work of the Agency because its work no longer aligned with the institution's particular view on the purpose of higher education, or because of general complacency towards the Agency and what it did.

'I get the feeling that VCs are more detached from it now and that there's a general feeling that "oh well, everything was alright [in Institutional Audit] so let's just let this run'....I think there has been a bit of disengagement at senior level because the outcomes have been mostly positive, and I think there was a misjudging of the ways things were going [politically] and there was a sort of "oh, that's okay then, QAA's gone away for five years, we can slacken off a bit.'"

[Assistant Director (c)]

This growing complacency was attributed to the predictability of the reviews and the perception that institutional level reviews were far less threatening than subject level reviews and hence required less engagement. It was also suggested that there was a diminishing return for institutions, as the reviews, their outcomes and reports became more predictable. One QAA respondent queried the value institutions were receiving given the amount of time and resources being invested in the review process. A further QAA respondent suggested that this might also be because of the more liberal nature of the review reports and the opaque style of the language used, which while protecting both the institution being reviewed and the Agency, produced dull and difficult to read reports.

'I think that Institutional Audit has a law of diminishing returns and because it is so predictable and the HEIs can prepare so much for it, it is not delivering as much conceptually as it could, because of its extreme stylisation which of course is something imposed on it basically by the system, on QAA by the system.'

[Chair of the Board]

In Bernstein's terms this would suggest that the PRF has learnt to play the Institutional Audit game it retains control of the recontextualisation rules of the pedagogic device by understanding how to demonstrate to the QAA that internal systems are robust.

7.1.2 Academic calibre of students

Two QAA respondents suggested that the academic calibre of students recruited had an impact on how the Agency was perceived. Institutions that normally recruit less academically able students, or students not so well prepared for higher education, were described as tending to rely more heavily on the QAA and its guidance. This was because such institutions needed to ensure that appropriate structures were in place to support the students and to demonstrate the rigour of their quality assurance mechanisms, not least because there was a perception that these were more likely to be scrutinised more closely. The QAA respondents suggested that institutions with more able students were likely to need less formalised structures, as the students would be more able to deal with what was thrown at them.

'Because of the type of student they recruit, and clearly they are taking very, very able people, regardless of what you throw at them in terms of the learning experience, they survive and come out the other end as a well-rounded graduate. Because of the nature of that institution, the resource base for the student to learn is significant... the whole infrastructure will be very strong and even if the person responsible for a particular area of delivery of their learning experience is naff, the student will still survive.... For less able students whose confidence level of being able to do things is already vulnerable... If you then don't secure a learning experience for them which is solid, their ability then to make up for the shortcomings and survive is impaired'

[Assistant Director (1)]

7.1.3 Experience of delivering higher education

Two QAA respondents noted that institutions new to delivering higher education, such as private organisations, were more fearful of the Agency and that helped them to focus their collective mind on ensuring appropriate systems and procedures were in place. The further education colleges, that deliver higher education provision, were described as being more positive about the Agency; finding its way of working more collegiate than Ofsted, the main external regulator of FE provision.

'...the impact of the arrival of the QAA looking at whether they should have taught degree awarding powers has concentrated their minds enormously on putting their structures and systems together.'

[Chair of the Board]

'...when you speak to FE who have an understanding of Ofsted and you talk about QAA, they hold us in high regard.'

[Assistant Director (m)]

7.1.4 Risk and rhetoric

It is apparent from the discussion above that in the QAA's view, the more a university perceives it is at risk of receiving a poor review outcome, the more it constructs the QAA as a quasi-regulatory body. This position is exacerbated further by the high degree of rhetoric about 'what the QAA does and does not want institutions to do' within the sector and the universities themselves. One respondent noted that as a consequence some institutions adopt a risk-averse/compliance approach to how they assure their own academic standards. In doing so the institutions do significantly more than was actually required by the Academic Infrastructure, and this was disproportionate – often referred to as 'gold plating'. Equally, despite the QAA's best efforts to promote the notion that there is not one correct way of doing things and that context was important, many institutions wanted to be told what to do. It was suggested that this was because of the

culture and values of the senior management team, and/or because of a fear of a negative outcome from an Institutional Audit/Review, and/or a lack of institutional confidence. The frustration was that often such institutions also complained of the Agency imposing too much bureaucracy on them, given that they were autonomous institutions.

7.1.5 Last engagement with the QAA

The nature of the most recent engagement with the QAA was described by Agency respondents as influencing perceptions. Of those respondents in the universities, this was particularly so for academic staff, many of whose last engagement with the QAA was in relation to the Teaching Quality Assessment method or Subject Review (see Chapter three) and not a positive experience. So although the Agency was described as doing much to develop and promote the ‘lighter/right touch’ of review methodology and change the image of the Agency since 2002, the historical legacy of subject level review lingers on. Memories of large amounts of paperwork, including student work being produced and deposited in the ‘base room’ for the reviewers to work through, accompanied by a large number of meetings, and where necessary the observation of teaching, are still raw. The QAA respondents described these reviews as having much higher stakes because there was a risk to personal as well as institutional reputations.

‘...there are still many academics in institutions whose last experience of the QAA was in subject review and assume that we still do the same thing.’

[Assistant Director (h)]

'...subject assessment revealed some of the dangers of quality assurance and the impact that in some cases was negative... there were two main lessons that I saw from that, the first was there was a very real pragmatic issue about burden, at any given time you were trying to manage four or five subject reviews in your own institution. Just the sheer administrative effort of supporting that, even if you thought that the reviews were wonderful and ought to happen, it just becomes literally unmanageable. The second thing was that it was also clear in some subject reviews... that some of the reviewers were not fully credible and not respected by the people they were reviewing. There was controversy about whether they were competent to do the job and that led to some questions about the outcomes of the reviews.'

[Chief Executive of the QAA, interview 1]

It was telling that the most recently appointed academic interviewed, who had little knowledge of the QAA, talked of the disastrous effect that TQA and Subject Review had on academic colleagues, some twelve years since the review method ended [Academic, University of Opawa]. The long-lasting impact of subject level review was also noted by the two QAA respondents who described choosing not to tell people, who he knew were academics, that he worked for the QAA, because he did not want the *'all too familiar berating'* that usually followed [Assistant Director, (e)]. Another recounted how when telling a friend that he was going to work for the QAA the friend said: *'Oh well, that'll be a bit of a killer when you go and tell people where you work; it will be a bit like telling them you're a tax inspector!'* [Assistant Director (1)].

In contrast, the subsequent review method focussed primarily at institutional level and with more of a 'developmental' element, was considered by two QAA respondents to be less worrisome for many institutions. As a result the sector did not try to control or manipulate it in quite the same way as they did with Subject Review. The QAA was perceived to be less of a threat.

'In terms of which had the higher stakes, I think TQA and subject review were the highest stakes, so Audit could develop its method and could develop along a more developmental line for institutions. Institutions weren't so worried about Audit, so they didn't try to capture it or to manipulate it in quite the way that they did with subject review, because they didn't feel that the stakes were so high.'

[Former Chief Executive of the QAA]

7.2 The Recontextualisation Process

It became apparent during the analysis of the interview data that the senior managers and particularly the quality professionals undertook one form of recontextualisation, and the academic staff another slightly more removed one. This is in keeping with the discussion in section 5.2.1 about the arms-length and 'mysterious' nature of the QAA for academic staff. I have therefore discussed the recontextualising process for each group separately, and I will return to the implications of this distinction later in the chapter.

7.2.1 The universities

Turning to the universities involved in this research specifically, it is possible to see, as suggested in previous sections, that how the senior managers and quality professionals represent and recontextualise the QAA is demarcated along institutional identities. In this instance with University of Lyttelton and the University of Merivale normally taking opposing views to each other, and the University of Opawa sitting somewhere in between.

University of Lyttelton

It appears that at institutional level, the QAA has little direct influence over University of Lyttelton: it is tolerated rather than needed.

'...and you know Lyttelton has a very particular value system which is around this de minimis role. That will affect the way people talk about it [the QAA] at the advanced level...the QAA is not the be all and end all... If we can't make that argument stack up then, we're on a hiding to nothing.'

[Senior manager, University of Lyttelton]

Engagement with the QAA and its guidance was perceived to be selective, and only undertaken if it was to the benefit of the University or was considered to be non-negotiable from the QAA's or HEFCE's perspective. It was suggested that where the Agency is taken account of, its message is recontextualised heavily and anchored within the culture and values of the University: as one academic noted:

'...most of what comes from the QAA to the University comes to the centre, then it comes from the centre to the department and my colleagues in the department would perceive that they are being told to do things by the centre. They're not being told to do things by the QAA.'

[Academic (quality), University of Lyttelton]

The University's approach is to ensure that its discourse about quality and standards links with academic discourse and practice, rather than being seen as purely process based. Indeed, one respondent spoke of the University making the decision to move away from using the term 'quality assurance' when in naming the key quality administrative units, committees and frameworks, to using one emphasising quality management, which was deemed more appropriate and reflected the higher level concept that formed the basis of the University's internal evaluation system.

'What drives us is what we think we should be doing in terms of our educational provision and we then make sure that aligns us [with the QAA] and doesn't get us into trouble in terms of audit/review. But that's not the driver. Four years ago now we changed our programme approval process quite radically. It wasn't the fact that a new section seven [of the QAA Code of practice] had just been published that drove that... what drove it was the fact that we felt that there were problems with our existing process and we wanted to align it much more clearly to our strategic drivers and other processes planning, resource allocation, all of that kind of thing.'

[Quality professional, University of Lyttelton]

This section highlights a possible weakness of the research and an interesting point of discussion in relation to validity in qualitative research. While the analysis of the interviews highlighted important perspectives of how the interviewees perceive and recontextualise the QAA, it would have been interesting to contrast them with the outcomes of an analysis of key committee minutes. Such an analysis might have allowed me to see if the portrayal of the QAA was reflected in the University's documentation at institutional vis-à-vis faculty/school/departmental level. This is not to distract from the value of the respondents' interviews, but recognises that the process of triangulation of data is a valid exercise (King and Horrocks, 2010, p164; Silverman, 2013, p290).

Returning to the quotation above, while in Bernstein's terms the PRF with the University of Lyttelton controls the rules of the pedagogic device, the respondent's reference to aligning with the QAA guidance and not getting into trouble, suggests that even for a 'doctrinal type' of university, the Agency holds some power and influence over it. Indeed, for all the protestation about the University's independence from the Agency, the senior manager talked of the potentially '*catastrophic*' consequences of getting a poor outcome from a QAA Institutional Audit/Review.

From the University of Lyttelton's perspective the QAA was more pertinent to '*other institutions*' in the sector. Several times the senior manager made explicit reference to how other, less prestigious institutions used the QAA as a sort of modernising external reference point to force through change, or to promote their status in the sector in the eyes of the public (see section 5.1.2).

In this context, the QAA was seen as a **necessary evil** which was not that pertinent to the functioning of the University. The QAA was a requirement of funding that had to be complied with, but only on the University's terms with heavy recontextualisation by senior management and quality professionals on behalf of academic staff. The central function had a legitimate role in making external regulation more context-specific for academic colleagues and to alleviate/minimise the burden on academic staff.

University of Opawa

Reflecting its slightly weaker insulation and boundary of the 'secular ideal type' of universities (see section 2.4.2) compared with the University of Lyttelton, the University of Opawa considered the QAA to be more of a **legitimate advisor**. It was also more accepted by the University's senior management as an embedded and naturalised part of higher education: '*so I think we've all developed and grown up with it [the QAA]*' [Senior manager, University of Opawa]. While there remained a tension between teaching and research within the institution, it was suggested that research intensive universities, such as Opawa, were starting to engage more with the QAA. Equally, the mission groups for these institutions, such as the 1994 Group, were described as seeking to have more influence with the Agency and in doing so alter the historical position of the teaching-led (vocational) institutions alone engaging with the QAA. In Bernstein's terms this demonstrates the struggle, even within the broad notion of the PRF, to influence an agent of the ORF in order to retain control over the pedagogic device(s).

The senior manager and quality professional spoke of using the QAA more proactively as a means of encouraging institutional self-reflection and benchmarking. The senior manager talked of the QAA providing a vocabulary/lexicon which enabled the University to talk about quality and standards, as well as learning from other institutions (through individual review reports and the summary reports that the QAA produced from the analysis of the review reports) and to benchmark internal performance with the view to modifying practice. It was noted that this change process was based on an ethos of sharing good practice, rather than on sanctions.

It was apparent that the University, like Lyttelton, also recontextualises the QAA's guidance into its own context and in a way that builds in some scope for variability in academic practice or interpretation of internal processes, in order to reflect the nature of teaching and the needs of programmes and students.

'There's still an amazing variation of practice, interpretation and in a sense that's good because some of it reflects the real needs of the programmes and the students. But there's a baseline there for judgement of standards.'

[Senior manager, University of Opawa]

The Quality professional noted that most academic staff do not make the link with the QAA and see quality assurance as coming from the University's administrative functions. This was seen as a mark of the QAA's success in embedding quality assurance into institutional practice, while still respecting institutional autonomy.

'...the whole principle of the QAA is wanting universities to embed a culture of quality assurance, to assimilate and naturalise the Code of Practice and so on, and that in a sense perhaps an index of its success is the extent to which the QAA is not explicitly identified as being the originator of these policies.'

[Quality professional, University of Opawa]

Other examples were provided where the QAA was still visible within the University; for example, updates about the QAA requirements/publications are provided to staff

through a monthly in-house publication on teaching. It seems that in doing this the University is reinforcing the QAA's image as the agency influencing the University's internal quality assurance procedures, and raising the profile of teaching within the University. In Bernstein's terms the senior management/quality professionals appear to be using the Agency, as an agent of the ORF, to rebalance the value placed on the different fields within the pedagogic device. Greater value is being placed on activity within the fields of recontextualisation and reproduction.

University of Merivale

Respondents from the University of Merivale perceived the QAA as being a powerful entity which has far-reaching and long-term consequences for the University, including greater caution towards any academic innovation.

'It [the QAA] can be perceived as quite threatening and people are cautious of it; careful in how they behave towards it because an institution like this is well aware of the negative consequences of getting it wrong... That creates the potential for maybe not some of the honesty that the system itself would desire.'

[Senior manager, University of Merivale]

The quotation above suggests a particular vulnerability for the 'vocational ideal type' of universities such as Merivale, with their more vulnerable reputations. It also infers the power held by the QAA because of the public nature of its Institutional Audit/Review reports. The senior manager considered that the pressure on the University to perform well in the QAA reviews would only increase within a more market-based higher education system and further stratification of the sector.

'At the moment, universities think that if they get a bad QAA report they're sunk and in the sector that is probably the case. [But] with regards to the government trying to reduce the sector and make it more elitist, that is a huge, huge threat.'

[Senior manager, University of Merivale]

This vulnerability was also highlighted by the Students' Union sabbatical officer for this 'ideal type' of university who noted that standards were perceived to be lower by some employers because of the calibre of the students that it recruited.

'There shouldn't be a difference in the value of similar degrees [across universities]... but if it comes down to a job maybe then they [a student from a 'higher status' university] will have a bit of an edge...I've looked at jobs and they say "you must be from a Russell group university".'

[Students' Union sabbatical officer, University of Merivale]

McLean. Abbas and Ashwin (2013, p271) suggest that lower-status universities find it more difficult to resist the influence of the ORF and its agents, and unsurprisingly the University of Merivale's recontextualising process was more cautionary compared to either the University of Opawa or Lyttelton. As a result, Merivale's institutional quality assurance procedures were risk-averse and more compliance-based; often resulting in procedures that expected more than the QAA did.

'[The QAA's] processes sometimes may be applied more flexibly by the Agency than they are by the institutions, because the institutions are being careful and risk averse and can't afford to take the risk that the QAA might not like something or that someone coming in might not like it and that then creates a tendency not for innovation but for sluggish compliance.'

[Senior manager, University of Merivale]

In this context internal procedures were perceived by academic staff as being complex, bureaucratic and divorced from what is done at the chalk-face. They also spoke of a gap in the expectations of what the centre wanted academic staff to do and what was practicable.

'There are constant suggestions for how to go about doing things to enhance the student experience; feedback is the most obvious one. There's all kind of things going on to try and make sure that it happens quicker and faster and easier. But it's a struggle...you have the desire to make sure the feedback is good and timely and making sure that the students know what part they've done wrong and how to improve it etc. and you've only got two weeks to mark it. You can't do both and that's the problem.'

[Academic (manager), University of Merivale]

'...it's a little bit like getting your bins emptied at the end of the week at home. The number of reasons for not getting the bins emptied [by the council] seems quite a lot, it's slightly open, you put the wrong thing in and so on; and it's a little bit like that with [the faculty committee]... the regulations are more complex than we can grasp so it's easy to get it wrong. And there isn't necessarily a sympathetic ear when we do get it wrong.'

[Academic (quality), University of Merivale]

The Quality professional at Merivale noted that perhaps the University had gone too far in demonstrating its accountability and ability to quality assure its provision, and making it *'too difficult for academics'*.

The University also appropriated the QAA in a more 'dynamic' manner than the other two universities; using it to reinforce its legitimate status as a university; to enhance its reputation further; and to monitor academic performance. In this instance the QAA is an **arbiter** across the sector, as well as a **lever for change**.

'...the process [Institutional Audit] created significant change in the institution, in terms of how it then sought to respond to the criticisms that were levelled at it and the extent to which it became different from taking on board the issues which were being raised, and so the use of the QAA by management to assist it in creating change is also important'.

[Senior manager, University of Merivale]

Unfortunately at the time of the interview I did not take the opportunity to explore more deeply with the senior manager the nature of the changes that were undertaken. It would have been interesting to see if these changes were examples of the senior management appropriating the QAA to control other elements of the PRF and the pedagogic device.

7.2.2 Academics

While all academics appeared happy for the quality professionals within their university to recontextualise the QAA's messages into local policies and procedures, it appeared that some academics play a role in interpreting the recontextualised texts on behalf of their academic colleagues. Some appear to take on the role of **'translator'**; for example

five of the academic staff from across the universities described how they acted as mediators, explaining institutional quality assurance policies and procedures to colleagues, and in one instance taking responsibility for completing the necessary paperwork on their behalf.

'Most of my colleagues just want to do their teaching and then spend all the spare time doing research "oh I don't want to have to do all the paper work". They're just glad that there's somebody in the department who just deals with the paper work and gets it out of their way.'

[Academic quality, University of Lyttelton]

Other respondents described a more **'protecting'** role where such academics ensure that colleagues follow procedures correctly and do not fall foul of central university requirements, nor put academic quality at risk. Other respondents described a role ensuring that the quality professionals and senior managers have a better understanding of the implications of discipline nuances in relation to quality assurance. For example, the more subjective nature of assessment in arts and design and *'the more unpredictable way most students work'* [Academic (quality), University of Merivale].

'My most recent course validation event was about [subject] ... that's not my field, [but] what I can do is I can look at the paperwork and ask: have you filled in the unit information forms correctly? Is it consistent? Have you given us the correct course information forms? Is it clear where assessment works? Can we spot bottle necks? All of this kind of stuff. So it's very much looking at the nitty gritty of whether they are complying with university procedures and I do that with a clear conscience. It's not just being petty, it's making sure that they, you know, they work the way we do.'

[Academic (quality), University of Merivale]

The examples provided above suggest that some respondents saw, in Bernstein's terms, that their role was to protect the pedagogic device from not only senior managers, but also from the academics themselves and the potential damage caused by not getting the procedures correct. Such roles also protect the academic's ownership of the recontextualising rules, for example, by trying to defend discipline identities from the

systematisation that quality assurance systems can introduce. For some academics their engagement with quality assurance provided an additional benefit in relation to **career progression**.

'So quality assurance generally was a key driver in my career progression in terms of the greater roles and responsibility that I took. It's certainly helped that I was interested and, I would hope, proficient in such matters that I got the [senior faculty role re] Teaching and Learning role when it came up.'

[Academic (manager), University of Opawa]

7.3 Summary

In this chapter I have shown, through the empirical findings, that in providing institutions with a vocabulary with which to develop the discourse on quality assurance and the nationally agreed reference points, the QAA has provided the universities with the tools and space within which to recontextualise the official discourse into the landscape of their own institutions. It appears that the capacity of the three universities to recontextualise the QAA and its messages is based on a number of factors identified by the QAA respondents. Of particular relevance to this study is the perceived position of the university in the higher education hierarchy of prestige, concomitant with the 'ideal type' of university it most resembles. The closer the university resembles the 'doctrinal' university, the more able it is to keep the QAA at 'arms-length', with the central administrative function heavily recontextualising the QAA's discourse. In this instance engagement with the QAA is limited and the Agency is constructed as a necessary intruder, safeguarding academic standards, protecting the reputation of the sector, monitoring the behaviour of 'other' institutions, but not interfering with what is legitimately the university's responsibility as an autonomous degree awarding body.

The more the university resembles the 'vocational' university the less likely it is to resist the influence of the QAA and, indeed, it might adopt a more risk-averse and conservative approach than advocated by the Agency. Such an approach might be

considered to reduce the risk of receiving a poor Institutional Review outcome, as well as provide an opportunity to drive through internal change.

The ‘secular type’ of university appears to hold a position somewhere in between the ‘doctrinal’ and ‘vocational’ universities, and has the capacity to recontextualise many of the QAA’s messages into the local context, but equally sees the QAA as a useful and legitimate advisor who can be used to bring about internal change in respect of a specific project.

The chapter, therefore, has answered research questions three and four, noting that the capacity of different universities to recontextualise what the QAA is saying and the degree of influence the QAA has, is demarcated along institutional boundaries and the notions of the ‘ideal types’ of universities. The answer comes with the caveat that the universities take the Agency’s institutional level reviews seriously, as a poor outcome would have a significant and wide-ranging negative impact.

In this chapter I have discussed the recontextualisation that is undertaken by the quality professionals and directed by the senior management, and the recontextualisation which is undertaken by the academic staff. To this end my suggestion in Chapter three that there are two sites of recontextualisation within the broader PRF: the **Central PRF** (C-PRF) and the **Academic-PRF** (A-PRF), is correct. The C-PRF, made up of the quality professionals and the institutional level quality committees, have primary responsibility for recontextualising the messages from the QAA into local quality assurance policies, procedures and guidance. With, as Newton (2002, p47) suggests the C-PRF viewing the notion of ‘quality’ differently from ‘front-line’ academics, and clearly wedded to the notions of managerialism and accountability.

As noted earlier, the degree to which these messages are mediated is demarcated along institutional lines. I have not, however, explored in the research the extent to which the institutional-level quality committee contributes or guides the recontextualisation

processes, vis-à-vis senior management. Nor have I looked at whether the balance of input is also dependent on the ‘ideal type’ of university that the institution most closely resembles; each ‘ideal type’ has a different culture of governance. Such cultural differences, however, might be misleading if, as suggested in section 5.2.2, a consequence of the QAA has been the systematisation of quality structures across the universities.

The A-PRF also undertakes a degree of recontextualisation of the QAA’s messages. One way is through reference to the QAA’s subject benchmark statements in the development of the curriculum, although I did not explore in any depth the exact nature of the recontextualisation process (see section 5.1.3). Secondly, in acting as a ‘translator’ or a ‘protector’ on behalf of other academics (see section 7.2.2 above), the academics are vicariously recontextualising the QAA via the university’s internal quality assurance processes. This outcome concurs with Trowler’s (1998, p126) suggestion that some academics undertake policy reconstruction. It also supports Newton’s (2002, p51) finding that academics take-on specific roles and hence types of recontextualisation.

The concepts of the C-PRF and A-PRF have enabled me to more accurately reflect on the roles of the senior managers, quality professionals and the academics within the recontextualisation of what the QAA says to universities. It would be beneficial to use these concepts in more detailed research into the recontextualisation process that goes on in universities.

The next and concluding chapter for the thesis considers the broader implications of the findings, both in the context of the professional issue, and in relation to the aims of the research.

CHAPTER EIGHT CONCLUSIONS

8.0 Introduction

In this chapter I reflect on the different aspects of the research and the degree to which I have achieved what I set out to do. In the process of reflection, I consider the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of the research, as well as the implications of the empirical findings for both the QAA and quality professionals in the universities.

8.1 The Professional Issue

I began this research wondering why after more than 10 years since the QAA was established, and seven years since its move away from the controversial subject level review of universities, was there still variation in how the role of the QAA was understood, and how the Agency was perceived by the universities? On the one hand it is presented by some universities as Beelzebub incarnate, systematising higher education and threatening academic autonomy. By other universities it is portrayed as doing a good job in protecting and supporting the higher education sector in maintaining academic standards and quality. For the majority, the Agency was seen as an inevitable part of current government policy towards higher education but was better than the alternatives – the *'better the devil you know'* scenario.

These multiple constructions often proved difficult for those working in the Agency because it meant a constant assessment and reassessment of what was being faced, in order to maximise the working relationships and get the job done. Add to this the increasing politicisation and marketisation of higher education, and it often felt as though the Agency was walking a precarious tightrope which was subject to various unpredictable mistral winds.

The professional issue to be explored through the research was therefore: **why is the QAA viewed and portrayed differently depending on who is making the assessment and in what context?**

8.2 Aims

I identified **two aims** for the research. The first originated when I worked for the QAA; the second arose when I returned to the UK and took up a role as a quality professional in a university.

The aims were:

- i) to provide those working at the QAA with an improved understanding of how different types of universities and staff within them perceive, construct and appropriate the Agency.
- ii) to provide a reference point against which quality professionals can assess their own university's institutional practice, in order to provide more effective support to colleagues in developing and implementing quality assurance processes, which are appropriate to the values and culture of the institution *and* contribute to the improvement of the quality and standards of teaching and learning in that institution.

In assessing whether I have achieved both of these aims, I realised that to achieve the first aim I would have needed to make an evaluation of whether the outcomes of the research had benefitted those working in the QAA. This was not feasible once I had ceased working for the Agency and moved to New Zealand. I did not continue the regular updates on progress with the research that I would have done as an employee. A discussion then could have taken place with the respondents, prior to submission of the thesis, to assess if these updates had made any difference to their understanding.

What is available to the Agency, however, is the thesis and therefore a resource that could be used to enhance the QAA's understanding of how the universities perceive, construct and appropriate the Agency. The assessment of the research's impact on their understanding could be undertaken as a separate piece of research.

I have achieved the second aim, and have provided a reference point against which quality professionals can assess their own university's institutional practice.

The analysis of the data identified a number of themes which help articulate how staff within the different types of universities perceive and recontextualise the Agency. Such differences appear to be demarcated along institutional lines at senior management level and the Central-PRF (C-PRF), but less so at the level of the Academic PRF (A-PRF). In many respects this finding confirms the anecdotal perceptions that circulate within the QAA, which I identified in Chapter two. For the QAA, it also means that their activities/communications with higher education providers can be tailored to meet the universities' different needs and in a discourse that has more meaning for them.

For the quality professional in the universities, the research provides the necessary data with which to initiate a discussion about the nature of the relationship it wants with the Agency. This also might be accompanied by a discussion about the relationship between the A-PRF and the C-PRF internally.

I return to the discussion about the implications of the empirical findings later in the chapter.

8.3 Methodology: Strengths, Weaknesses and Limitations

8.3.1 Reflections on the research approach

Based on my position that knowledge and the concept of quality assurance is socially constructed, I chose to adopt a qualitative research approach in order to compare the experiences of those working at different levels in three universities and at the QAA. The decision to adopt a qualitative research strategy was the right option. It provided a wealth of rich empirical data, which a quantitative survey approach would not have provided to the same extent. The disadvantage, however, was the significant amount of data to analyse. Thirty-two interviews were, in retrospect, perhaps over-ambitious.

I adopted a cross-sectional research design as it enabled me to gather a sizeable data set relatively easily at more or less one single point in time (Bryman, 2012, p59). It also enabled me to undertake intra- and inter-comparison across the universities and the QAA. This approach worked well, as seen in the previous two empirical chapters. It is worth noting that although the transcription of the 32 interviews took some considerable time, it was advantageous that I elected to do the majority of them myself as it made the data much more alive and made the coding process easier.

The cross-sectional approach meant, however, that at times during the analytical process I was frustrated because it provided only a snapshot of the respondents' experience. The alternative would have been to adopt a case study approach which might have enabled a more in-depth exploration of how the respondents constructed their views of the QAA. But this method would have been at the expense of my looking at three universities, as my resources were not sufficient to undertake multiple case studies. The comparative nature of the study which was central to looking at the professional issue would then have been lost.

The research was limited to looking at the QAA's relationship with universities in England and this provided a sensible bounded data source from which to recruit interviewees. It would be interesting however, to explore some of the issues raised in the empirical chapters in a number of different contexts; for example the different countries within the UK; different higher education providers such as private for-profit institutions, or those specialising in one particular field of provision such as postgraduate courses. Equally it would be fascinating to look at the recontextualisation process that takes place in other countries, perhaps comparing another mature external quality assurance framework, with one which is less mature, and/or where there is a very strong ORF, such as Saudi Arabia.

The development of the model of 'ideal types' of universities (see section 2.4) provided an effective means of organising the significant number of universities in England into categories from which to identify potential data sources. The model also provided a greater depth of contextual information which helped to explain why the universities take a particular stance in how they perceive the QAA and the nature of their relationship with the Agency.

The decision to talk to individuals from different levels within the universities and the QAA was successful in exploring the issues in some depth and in identifying patterns of data by type of respondent. It also moved me away from thinking about universities as homogenous entities, to thinking about them as collections of subgroups and/or individuals. This more differentiated focus was central to exploring the professional issue and building up the patterns of experiences.

A weakness of the research was that I did not take full advantage of the access I had to the academic staff. I could have explored in more detail with them the recontextualisation process that takes place at the A-PRF level to establish pedagogic practice. This data could then have been compared to the findings of other researchers

such as Trowler (1998), Henkel (2000) and Newton (2002), and as noted above, at the start of the research my focus was on the QAA and I did not appreciate how valuable understanding this recontextualising process would have been. This aspect only became clear once I had begun analysing the data, which was after I had left the QAA and moved to New Zealand. Follow-up interviews were therefore not feasible. This example highlights the importance of thinking carefully about the scheduling of the interviews and allowing time for the early initial coding of each interview. This method would have enabled more of an inductive approach to be taken.

Other examples of further research are discussed at appropriate points in the rest of the chapter (see sections 8.4; 8.5.1; and 8.5.4).

8.3.2 Reflections on the data collection techniques

Using semi-structured interviews to gather the data worked well and enabled a reasonably large amount of data to be collected quickly. The use of an interview schedule as a prompt sheet meant that there was sufficient consistency in the areas covered in each interview to enable comparison across the respondents. There was also sufficient scope within the interviews to allow for a particular point of discussion to be developed. As discussed in Chapter four, I acknowledge that this more systematised approach to the data collection might be considered too restrictive for many who undertake qualitative research, particularly in the context of ethnographic research. However, since comparability of the data was important in exploring the professional issue, the approach was appropriate.

Keeping a reflective diary and noting how each interview went, helped me to review whether I was facilitating or inhibiting the discussion through my interaction with the respondents. This was particularly important as I was undertaking research within my employing organisation and in the universities it reviews. A key learning point for me as

the interviews progressed was that silence can encourage the respondent to contribute more; a finding which has transferred across to other areas of my professional and private life.

In section 4.6.2 I discussed the potential influence of my affiliation to the QAA on the data. Despite using techniques to limit this, the generally positive nature of the data about the QAA suggests that the interviewees were more generous in their comments than they might have been to a researcher independent of the Agency.

8.3.3 Using insider contacts and gatekeepers

In Chapter four, I discussed using ‘insider’ contacts and gatekeepers in order to gain access to the respondents in the universities and to some of the respondents at the QAA. Selecting the correct gatekeeper proved important and I was fortunate enough that my ‘insider’ contacts at the universities were able to gain access on my behalf with little difficulty. Gaining permission from the gatekeepers at the QAA was part of the approval process for undertaking the professional doctorate, but meant that I had to renew this on an annual basis and this was subject to what the Agency assessed to be reasonable progress with the doctorate.

Originally, I was concerned that leaving the selection of who to interview in the universities to the ‘insider’ contact, might be problematic. However, most of my requests were met. The only exception was the request to interview an academic member of staff *‘without existing or previous experience of holding positions with responsibility for quality assurance at departmental level’* in each university. Only one, out of a possible three was available. In hindsight, the provision of such individuals might have been problematic for the ‘insider’ contacts, as all were quality professionals or linked to the areas responsible for quality assurance, and so would not necessarily be in regular contact with such academic staff. In reality, all the academic respondents

spoke of the experience of ‘other colleagues’, so I felt able to draw some generalisations from what was said and apply them to the wider academic community. Reflecting on the interview with the academic member staff with no responsibility for quality assurance in their role, it was clear that while the use of a common interview schedule across the university interviews helped, the language used was perhaps too submerged in the quality assurance discourse and did not express some of the areas for discussion particularly well.

8.4 Reflections on the analytical Framework

The analytical framework, drawing on Bernstein’s concepts of the pedagogic device and its rules, has enabled me to problematise the professional issue by making the link between quality assurance and the structure of knowledge. It is all too easy to think about the QAA’s work as a bureaucratic process which is pertinent at institutional level alone, particularly now that external quality assurance in UK is at the institutional level only.

This is not to say however, that Bernstein’s concepts are easily applicable to empirical data. They are abstract and designed for a different context from the one to which I was applying them. In Chapter three, I identified that this might be problematic, but with careful thought and perseverance it has been possible to use the analytical framework to undertake the second stage of the analysis. Going through this process has helped me to move from exploring the data as a quality professional, still firmly rooted in the culture of the QAA, to a researcher. This is a key development when undertaking endogenous (insider) research, as I highlighted in Chapter four.

The analytical framework enabled me to map the recontextualisation process and the contribution of the ORF and PRF and their agents (HEFCE and the QAA, and the representative bodies UUK, GuildHE and the mission groups respectively) (see section

3.3). The analysis of the data confirmed that this model reflects the complex and multidimensional nature of the recontextualisation process that surrounds and includes the QAA.

Bernstein's notion of recontextualising has enabled me to look at how universities translate the messages coming from the QAA and where this translation takes place, as discussed in Chapter six. The advantage of Bernstein's high level of abstraction is that his concepts can be extended when applying them to the empirical context. In this instance, I extended his concept of the PRF to include the two sites of recontextualising that were evident from the data analysis: the Academic PRF (A-PRF) and the Central PRF (C-PRF). The latter includes the quality professionals and institutional level quality committees. In addition, the analysis indicated there were also members of the A-PRF who act as the translators for the messages arising from the C-PRF (see section 7.2.2).

There might also be another recontextualisation site which is linked to students. A form of recontextualisation seems to take place in relation to students' contribution to quality assurance. For example, when students in the universities contribute to the development of the curriculum, as highlighted by the Students' Union officer from the University of Otago; by the NUS as they brief students in their role in quality assurance, and by the students who are members of the QAA review teams and have to interpret the QAA's reference points in the course of the Institutional Audit/Review. Further research into whether these separate sites exist or whether students influence the C-PRF and the A-PRF would be interesting. A weakness of the research is that I did not exploit the interviews with the students to discuss further the contribution of students to internal quality assurance processes.

8.5 The Implications for the Professional Issue

Returning to the professional issue, the empirical findings suggest that there are a number of reasons why the QAA is viewed and portrayed differently, depending on who is making the assessment and in what context. I have collated these into four main areas: i) the position in the perceived hierarchy of prestige; ii) the public nature of the QAA review judgements and reports and the impact on institutional reputation; iii) contestation within the PRF; and iv) the multidirectional relationships between the ORF, the PRF and their agents.

These reasons have implications for the QAA and the quality professionals in higher education providers more broadly and these will be discussed briefly in each of the following sections.

8.5.1 The perceived higher education hierarchy

The empirical data suggests that institutional position in the hierarchy within the higher education sector in England determines how a university views and portrays the QAA. As noted earlier (see section 7.2) the views, particularly of the C-PRF, are demarcated along institution lines and the ‘ideal type’ of university they most closely resemble. Those ‘higher’ up the perceived hierarchy of status and closest to the ‘doctrinal ideal type’ see the QAA as a necessary evil which intrudes into certain areas of responsibility. In contrast, those towards the ‘lower’ end of the hierarchy and closest to the ‘vocational ideal type’ see the QAA as an arbiter and a lever for change (see section 7.2.1). A similar demarcation is seen in Chapter six when the process of how the universities recontextualise the QAA is discussed.

This finding confirms much of the anecdotal evidence at the QAA about ways in which the universities respond to the Agency. Nevertheless it is an important finding because it helps to explain why external quality assurance will remain a contested arena. The

analysis of the data suggests that institutional culture and values, accompanied by the different self-interests of the senior management, means that the C-PRF and the A-PRF are not united in their approach to the issue of external quality assurance. The TINA approach (*'there is no alternative'*), described by Morley in 2003 (p165) still stands. Researchers such as Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2015, p620) are beginning to suggest such alternatives⁷⁵, but recognise that manifesting this into a meaningful and coherent policy will be difficult to achieve given the strength of the dominant and mainly ORF determined discourse.

This situation is, to some extent, to the benefit of the QAA because it means that there is no ground swell to challenge its work and no viable alternative suggested from within the sector. However, this appearance of apathy/resignation does mean that there is scope for the ORF to manipulate the QAA's remit to push forward a particular policy initiative.

An understanding of how the different universities portray the QAA within their institutions, and to the ORF, students and the public, will also help the Agency determine its strategic approach to engaging with the different types of universities within the sector. As suggested in section 6.1.1 earlier, the QAA could rationalise its scope of work to focus just on safeguarding academic standards, with another body such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA) undertaking the Agency's enhancement work. For example, the HEA could work with higher education providers to establish the (threshold) academic standards. This would then provide resources for the Agency to develop a more sophisticated approach to working with the expanding number of different types of higher education providers in England.

⁷⁵ For example, Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2015, p620) suggest that an alternative to the ORF's definition of what counts as high quality undergraduate higher education should be focussed on the *'relations which students develop with particular kinds of academic knowledge through their undergraduate education and the impact this has on their identities'*.

The research suggests that it would not be wise for the QAA to attempt to treat all higher education providers the same, as appears to be the case with the development of the risk-based, common review method (see Chapter three). As King (2011, p3) notes, this is very difficult to operationalise and risky for the QAA itself, particularly in relation to the well-established universities disengaging from the QAA's activities. The initial analysis of the QAA's work in Chapter three and the analysis of empirical data have already confirmed a lack of trust by the ORF, the public and politicians in relation to the PRF safeguarding academic standards. For a truly risk-based external review method to operate effectively, the ORF needs to trust the PRF and the QAA in assessing the level of risk and adopting the appropriate review method. The resulting review outcomes and reports must also have credibility with the ORF. This level of trust of the PRF is not currently the case and the QAA in some parts of the ORF. Indeed, the analysis in Chapters three and five have already shown concerns in the QAA and the universities about the lack of understanding by politicians and the public about how the sector and its quality assurance functions. The move to the common review method could exacerbate that lack of understanding further, because the system relies on a fairly sophisticated understanding of the concept of 'risk' and the meaning of 'threshold' academic standards.

The QAA's development of a common review method has a logic, not least for the economies of scale, however, if there are already significant variances in how three different types of universities perceive, construct and recontextualise the QAA, these distinctions will only be exacerbated across the full and diverse range of higher education providers. In this context, the continuing issue is therefore how can the common review method be sufficiently flexible to not only deal with the range of maturity of institutions providing higher education, but also provide an effective external review which contributes to maintaining academic standards and improving

quality? The universities, particularly those at the top of the higher education hierarchy (the 'doctrinal' institutions), will continue to demand a reduction in the burden for them, as well as demand a rigorous system of quality assurance to protect the higher education 'club' against the behaviour of *others* and the increasing number of alternative higher education providers.

The empirical data has already highlighted concerns about the occurrence of cultural dissonance with the peer review teams. I suggest that this will only get worse under the common review method. I suspect that the sheer volume of reviews being undertaken will mean that the scope to align the peer review panel with the type of institution being reviewed will be very limited.

Equally, concerns raised by the then Assistant Directors about the systematisation of their role (see section 6.1.2) will need to be considered further by the Agency. Such lack of flexibility could limit the degree of sophistication in the decision-making which is likely to be necessary in a risk-based external quality assurance system.

For quality professionals in universities, an understanding of the extent to which perceived institutional status in the hierarchy can impact on how the university perceives and recontextualises the QAA provides a reference point for them to assess quality assurance practice in their own institution. It also might reveal practices that are culturally embedded in the university which the C-PRF wishes to change. As we saw in Chapter two, the UK's external quality assurance system is based on the notion of quality as '*fitness for purpose*' (Raban and Cairns, 2014, p114), therefore a clearer understanding of the rationale for an institution's approach to quality management can help it to reflect on what is '*fitness for purpose*' in its context. The quality professional at the University of Merivale, for example, reflected in her interview on whether the University's internal quality assurance mechanisms had gone too far in their requirements, compared with the expectations of the QAA (see Chapter seven).

Given the potentially powerful position of the C-PRF (see section 5.2.1) in the recontextualisation process, it would be interesting to extend the research to look more closely at the role of the C-PRF, perhaps adopting a more ethnographic approach. This would also extend the research of Newton (2002). Alternatively it would be interesting to look the current data in relation to the C-PRF and look, for example, at how the quality professionals operate as a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998), and the impact this might have on the recontextualising process they undertake.

8.5.2 Public nature of the reports and institutional reputation

It is clear from the analysis outlined in Chapters five and seven that respondents from both the universities and the QAA consider that a main source of power for the QAA lies in the publishing of the outcomes of its institutional reviews (see for example sections 5.1.1 and 7.1.1). Risk to reputation is uppermost in the minds of the C-PRF across the universities in preparing for external review. From the QAA's perspective it is important that its reports have credibility with both the universities and the public. In my initial analysis of the QAA in Chapter three, I suggested that the QAA had changed its position and was adopting a more inspection style of reporting, tied more closely to the UK Quality Code. While this development has taken place since the research data were collected, the QAA's intention to change its style of reviewing and reporting was evident in the Handbook for the Institutional Review Method for England and Northern Ireland (March 2011), which was published shortly before the interviews in the universities took place. The data analysis revealed that the C-PRF across the universities and some of the QAA staff were concerned about this development. This more inspectoral approach potentially provides the QAA with more influence over the pedagogic device, as it could lead some C-PRFs to adopt a more risk-averse style of recontextualisation because the perceived risk of a poor outcome is heightened by the closer reporting against the expectations of the Quality Code. Alternatively, the risk-

averse style might be evident through a more cautious presentation of information to be reviewed, or more managed engagement between the review team and university staff during the review. This approach could cause difficulty for some quality professionals in the universities who are trying to develop a constructive link between quality assurance and pedagogic practice.

8.5.3 Differing views within the PRF

Another reason why the QAA is viewed and portrayed differently depending on who is making the assessment is the contestation that exists within the PRF. Similar to the stratification that occurs in the higher education sector as a whole, Bernstein notes (2000, p60) there are different PRFs across and within the universities and each could view and portray the QAA differently.

I have already discussed the presence of the C-PRF and the A-PRF, the former of which is likely to portray the QAA, internally to academics, and externally to the ORFs and the public, based on the cultural values and nature of the university and what is in its best interest (Newton, 2002, p47). What is clear is that, since subject level review, the C-PRF and A-PRF have retained control of the pedagogic device and its rules, but that the QAA influences the rules in certain ways, particularly the recontextualising and evaluative rules (see sections 5.1.3; 5.2.1; 6.1.2 and 7.2.1).

The analysis set out in Chapter five indicates that the Agency's 'success' with influencing what universities do lies in its use of peer referencing in developing guidance materials and conducting reviews. The PRF is content with that, providing they consider the peers to be legitimate and appropriate for the university they are reviewing. Therefore, it is in the interest of the Agency to ensure it draws on academics and quality professionals of high calibre from across the range of higher education providers, supporting those who might have less experience of external quality

assurance. It will be important that the QAA works with the PRF in defining what is meant by high calibre in the changing HE landscape and that this is reflected in the criteria for selecting the academics who work with the Agency. The ORF accepts this approach currently because it has meant that the universities have cooperated in the development and continuation of the external quality assurance system. This point of view is not necessarily true for all elements of the ORF and the empirical data and my initial analysis of the QAA's work also provided examples of where politicians do not understand why it is appropriate to use academic peers (see sections 6.1 and 6.2.2).

A question in the light of the data analysis is to what extent should the QAA be concerning itself with the nature of the recontextualising process that takes place in the universities, and the degree to which A-PRF and C-PRF are involved in it? It can be suggested that there are two sites of recontextualisation, because the analysis indicates that the recontextualisation process is dominated by the C-PRF. While this is not necessarily a problem, in two instances the empirical findings suggested that the Agency had lost something by no longer engaging with the academics. In one case (a respondent from the QAA), regret was expressed about the failure to get academics to take responsibility for quality assurance as part of being a professional academic. So should the QAA be encouraging/supporting the C-PRF to be adopting a particular approach to encourage academics to engage more in internal quality assurance? The empirical findings suggest that the structures and the status of the C-PRF are too well established to accept this approach. The QAA's involvement in this area would be seen as another example of 'mission creep' by the Agency. While working in a university I found it helpful to couch discussion about quality assurance in the context of good research practice. This approach often helped to produce a more creative debate and moved the discussion away from being process-based.

8.5.4 Multidirectional influences

The analysis supports and extends my initial suggestion that the relationship between the QAA, the universities, the HEFCE and the Government is a complex and multidirectional one, as set out in Figure 5 in Chapter three. This position is largely based on the historical antecedents of the universities and their status as legally independent autonomous bodies, responsible for setting their own academic standards under the auspices of their right to award their own degrees (Williams, 2009, p4).

There appears to be disagreement about the nature and ownership of the external quality assurance system: not only between the PRF and the ORF, but within each of these groupings and their agents. The QAA, as an agent of the ORF but with a (moral) contract with the PRF, must become even more sophisticated in developing and wearing different 'faces' in order to deal with these multifarious self-interests which push and pull the Agency's work. This task is made all the harder because, as the analysis of the data appears to confirm, the QAA's independence as perceived by the universities has diminished recently, whereas its *advisory role* to the agents of the ORF and PRF is confirmed (Brown and Carasso, 2013, p122) (see section 6.2.1).

What was particularly interesting from the data analysis, was a sense that the position of the representative bodies (UUK and GuildHE) as agents of the PRF, is changing. I had not anticipated the concern raised by some of the university respondents about these bodies becoming increasingly politicised and almost acting as an agent of the ORF. The role and status of the representative bodies accordingly warrants further exploration with the universities, the QAA and the representative bodies themselves, if the opportunity to undertake further research arises.

The empirical findings suggest that there was some appetite for the QAA to modernise in order to support the evolving/new landscape of higher education in England. However, the empirical data also suggest that the Agency's historical antecedents and

traditions are powerful, and although there has been a significant change in staff within the QAA since the interviews, it will take longer for perceptions to change in the sector, where staff turnover is likely to be slower. We have already seen that anything which threatens the PRF's control over the pedagogic device is likely to be either protested against directly, or captured and manipulated by the PRF as was seen in the subject level review era (see section 7.1.5).

One alternative would be to change the funding mechanism for the QAA to have its regulatory function funded directly by the Treasury alone, and have its enhancement function (if retained) funded by the higher education providers. This approach might be acceptable to the PRF providing that the principle of peer review remained. If that principle were removed then, as clearly indicated in the analysis, it would change the very essence of collaborative regulation between the PRF and ORF and would be unacceptable to the universities. I would suggest that no politician/government would be prepared to take this forward at this time.

Another alternative would be for employers and the National Union of Students to contribute to the funding of the Agency, but this would only further complicate the relationship between those currently involved. It might also be seen as more stakeholders trying to control the pedagogic device albeit at arm's length.

My view is that the QAA in its current form and purpose has served its time and has been successful in introducing the concept of external review and public accountability to the universities. With a potential lifting of the fees cap a radically different organisation from the QAA will be demanded, with greater control given to those universities who have established effective quality assurance mechanisms (Brown and Bekhradnia, 2013, p11). This development, I suggest, will depend on the extent to which the issue of academic standards and quality of UK higher education has political value for the ORF.

8.6 Summary and Final Reflections

The previous three empirical chapters have begun to link the data to the professional issue of *why the QAA is viewed and portrayed differently depending on who is making the assessment and in what context*. I have identified four main reasons why the QAA is viewed as being multifaceted with different ‘faces’ which are seen at different times: an institution’s position in the higher education hierarchy; the public nature of the QAA reports and the impact on institutional reputation; contestation within the PRF; and the multidirectional relationships between the ORF, the PRF and their agents. But while the presentation of multiple faces makes the position of the QAA complex and challenging, it also, to a degree, suits the Agency. This approach has, I am sure, ensured its survival over the last 18 years. But this process of developing and refining its multifaceted approaches is resource intensive. If it does have to tender for its contract with the HEFCE from 2016-17 onwards, as announced in October 2014, then resource restrictions could place such investment in jeopardy.

The research provides a snapshot of the world between July 2009 and June 2011. It has taken a while to write the thesis up and the world for the QAA and the universities has continued to evolve. The next challenge I think for the QAA is to retain the engagement of particularly the ‘doctrinal’ and ‘secular ideal types’ (King, 2011, p4), while focussing on assessing and supporting the quickly expanding group of alternative higher education providers. One way to achieve this is to demonstrate a reduction in the ‘burden’ of external quality assurance for these types of universities, or they will query what they are getting from the Agency, and finally suggest a viable alternative to what the Agency does. As noted in Chapter three, this possibility is starting to be seen to some extent with UUK’s document published in February 2015 *‘Quality, equity, sustainability: the future of higher education regulation’* which outlines its proposals to tackle the challenges of quality assurance within the changing funding structures. Perhaps more

worryingly for the QAA, is the recent revelation in the *Times Higher*, 8 June, 2015 of a leaked draft HEFCE policy document which suggests that the QAA reviews could be abolished (Grove, 2015). The policy document is due for publication at the end of June 2015 for consultation.

It is worth reflecting that I began this research unsure of what I would find out by doing it, or how helpful it would be to my professional work; despite colleagues at the QAA and universities saying that it was an interesting project. For me, it has provided a wealth of knowledge which, even before the end of the research, helped me begin to think differently about how to support colleagues not only in implementing the university's quality assurance processes, but also in thinking about what sort of university the institution wanted to be, and matching the quality assurance processes to that. Nine months ago, however, I left the university I was working in to concentrate full-time on finishing the thesis. Will I go back to work within the higher education sector as a quality assurance professional? I am not sure, but if I do, I will certainly be thinking about quality assurance and the QAA in a very different way.

APPENDIX 1 EXAMPLE OF EMAIL SENT TO INSTITUTIONAL CONTACTS

From: Elaine Harries Jenkins
Sent: 04 April 2011 16:37
To: [University Contact]
Subject: A request for my doctoral thesis

Dear [Name of Contact]

I hope you don't mind me contacting you in my guise as a research student at Cardiff University.

I wonder if I might ask your advice.

I'm currently doing my thesis for a professional doctorate; the aim of the research is to undertake an analysis of how the QAA is perceived by a range its stakeholders in context of its role, authority and influence in the sector. In doing so I hope to identify the QAA's position in the social and political fields.

Obviously, higher education institutions are key to such a study and I'm trying to organise three case studies based around the different typologies of institutions based on the age of the institution: ancient, pre 1992, post 1992, where I could interview a number of staff at different levels of the university structure.

Ideally I would like to interview:

- a member of the senior management team with responsibility for teaching and learning – such as a Pro-Vice Chancellor
- the Head of the central administrative department responsible for quality and standards
- two Heads of Departments
- a lecturer without management responsibility for quality and standards

I would also like to interview a sabbatical officer from the Students' Union, but if you think more appropriate I am happy to approach them directly.

Each interview would last approximately 45 minutes to an hour (although could be shorter if more convenient for the interviewee) and would be recorded with the interviewee's permission. The interview would explore four broad areas:

- the role and authority of the QAA
- the factors which influence teaching and learning, including curriculum design
- the impact of the QAA and external quality assurance on higher education
- the purpose of higher education

Ideally I would like to visit the University to conduct the interviews, but they could be conducted by telephone if preferred.

All data collected would be used for the sole purpose of my thesis.

Do you think that the relevant colleagues in the University might be interested in helping me with this research?

If so, who would be the best person to approach to organise the interviews? It would be extremely helpful if these could take place between April and June this year.

Many thanks in advance for your help.

Best wishes

Elaine

Elaine Harries Jenkins

Assistant Director

Reviews Group

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

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Gloucester GL1 1UB

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APPENDIX 2 INFORMATION SHEET FOR INTERVIEWEES

Background to the study

I am a part-time postgraduate research student undertaking a professional doctorate in education at the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University. I am also an assistant director in the Reviews group at the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

My research is looking at the how different stakeholders view the role of the QAA, to determine the QAA's position in the political and social fields. The research will form the basis of my doctoral thesis.

I wish to interview a range of individuals including: staff within the QAA; those who undertake reviews for the QAA; staff and students from higher education institutions; and other external national bodies with whom the QAA works. An examination of existing data gathered by the QAA regarding, for example its reviews, and environmental scanning will also take place.

The interviews will last an average of between 30 – 45 minutes and will cover two broad areas: the role of the QAA, and its impact on higher education. Each interview will be recorded and transcribed fully.

Confidentiality

The recordings of the interviews will be stored in a secure location in strict accordance with the Data Protection Act. Only the researcher and her two supervisors will have access to the data. All data will be anonymised, people's names and job titles will not be included in reports, but participants should be aware that they may be identifiable through comments that they make. No interview data will be used in any of the QAA's review methods. A copy of the transcript is available from the researcher on request.

I hope that you will be able to help in this research. If you agree to take part, please complete the consent form. You are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

How will the results be used?

The data from this research will be used for:

- Professional doctorate thesis
- Academic research papers and presentations

Please get in touch if you would like further information:

Elaine Harries Jenkins, 07771877146; JenkinsEH@Cardiff.ac.uk

Thank you.

APPENDIX 3 CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWEES

Research into the role and authority of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

- I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study, I have had the opportunity to consider the information, and ask any questions.
- I am willing to take part in the interview for this research and for the interview to be recorded.
- I understand that no-one will have access to the recording beyond the researcher and her two supervisors at Cardiff University.
- I understand that any personal statements made in the interview will be confidential. As far as possible, all comments will be anonymised in any report or papers that are produced as a result of the research. People’s names or job titles will not be included in reports.
- I understand that a copy of the transcript of the interview is available from the researcher on request.
- I understand that taking part in the research is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.
- I understand that the data from this research will be used for three things:
 - Professional doctorate thesis
 - Academic research papers and presentations

Name of respondent (print):

Signature of respondent:

Date:

Name of researcher (print): Elaine Jenkins.....

Signature of researcher:

Date:

Researcher notes for introduction

Thank the interviewee for agreeing to undertake this interview.

Explain that I am currently undertaking a professional doctorate in education in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University

Refer to the information sheet and consent form

Give the interviewee time to read both documents.

Ask if they have any questions and ask them to sign the form if they are willing to participate in the interview. Emphasise to the interviewee that they can withdraw from the research at any time.

Emphasise too that I am not there as a member of staff for the QAA but as student. Stress confidentiality.

Check that they are (still) happy for the interview to be recorded? Anything said in the interview is confidential. Refer again to the consent form.

Ensure that the interview has signed the consent form before asking the first question.

Questions

- 1 Could you tell me a little about your role in the University?
- 2 What is your involvement in quality assurance – internally/externally?
- 3 What factors influence teaching and learning in the University?
- 4 What words do you associate with quality assurance and the QAA?
- 5 What do you think are the benefits and drawbacks of using peer review in external review?
- 6 What do you see as the role and responsibilities of the QAA?
- 7 Whose voice(s) does the QAA represent?
- 8 How do you think the QAA is perceived by senior management, those responsible for quality assurance (ie central function), academic staff?
- 9 What has been the QAA's impact in the higher education sector?
- 10 Where do you think this impact has been: institutional level, faculty level, departmental level, subject or individual level? What has been the impact on your day-to-day role?
- 11 Are there tensions between academic values and quality assurance?
- 12 Which do you think institution's give more credence/importance to: the NSS, RAE or the QAA Institutional Audit?
- 13 Where does the QAA's authority come from?
- 14 Who sets/influences the QAA's agenda/work?

- 15 What do you see as the purpose of higher education?
- 16 Does the QAA's remit support this purpose?
- 17 Do you think the QAA should be abolished? Or what do you think the role of the QAA should be, or should it exist at all?

Thank the interviewee and ask them if there is anything else they would like to add.

**APPENDIX 5 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR STUDENTS' UNION
SABBATICAL OFFICERS**

[Research briefing notes as appendix 4]

- 1 Could you tell me a little about your role as SU president for background
- 2 What words do you associate with the QAA/quality assurance?
- 3 What do you think students want/expect from higher education?
- 4 What is the role of students in higher education.....and in its quality assurance?
- 5 Do you think these roles have changed/are changing?
- 6 What information about the institution is important to students?
- 7 Are students consumers?
- 8 What will be the impact of student fees on student expectations?
- 9 What is more important for students NSS scores, RAE/REF rating, the QAA report? [why?]
- 10 What do you see as the role and responsibilities of the QAA?
- 11 Where does the QAA's authority come from?
- 12 Do you think the current model of external quality assurance meets the needs of students? [If not why?]
- 13 Are students aware of the QAA?
- 14 If yes, how do you think they perceive the QAA?
- 15 What do you think about the QAA using student reviewers/auditors?
- 16 Overall, what has been the QAA's impact in HE? [incl. Its publications]
- 17 There is a lot of discussion at the moment about the provision of information to students about HE – what is the QAA's role in this/ what should the QAA be providing?
- 18 Who sets/influences the QAA's agenda/work?

Thank the interviewee and ask them if there is anything else they would like to add.

APPENDIX 6 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR THE QAA STAFF

[Research briefing notes as appendix 4]

- 1 What words do you associate with the QAA?
- 2 What do you see as the role and responsibilities of the QAA?
- 3 Has this role changed over time? If so, how?
- 4 Who are the QAA's stakeholders?
- 5 What is the nature of the QAA's relationship with these stakeholders?
- 6 How do you think the QAA is perceived by these stakeholders?
- 7 What has been the QAA's impact in the higher education sector?
- 8 Where do you think this impact has been: institutional level, faculty level, departmental level, subject or individual level?
- 9 What do you think are the benefits and drawbacks of using peer review?
- 10 Do you have any sense how the QAA's publications such as: the academic infrastructure, review reports, outcomes papers are used by the stakeholders?
- 11 Which do you think institution's gives more credence/importance to the RAE or the QAA Institutional Audit?
- 12 What do you see as the challenges for the QAA?
- 13 Where does the QAA's authority come from?
- 14 Who sets/influences the QAA's work/agenda?
- 15 Where do you see the QAA this time next year, in five years' time and in ten years' time?
- 16 What do you see as the purpose of higher education?
- 17 Does the QAA's remit support this purpose?

Thank the interviewee and ask them if there is anything else they would like to add.

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