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The Quality Movement Discourse in the Higher Education Sector: a General Review

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The Quality Movement discourse in the higher education sector
A general review

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Abstract
This paper – the first of a series of three – describes some of the macro milestones in the evolution of the Quality Movement in the industrial environment. The emphasis then shifts to reviewing the discourse relating to quality in the higher education sector in the UK. Attention is given to Quality Assessment, Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement models. The interface or tension lines between quality as a controlling mechanism or as a tool for development are outlined. Predominant concerns and issues as expressed by academics are clustered into macro questions, the answers to which will require further longitudinal research.

Purpose of the study
The broad purpose of the study is to present the notion of quality as a tool in the higher education sector to the undergraduate[1] or postgraduate student, searchers, practitioners or those new to this concept. To facilitate this I include an accessible general review of relevant literature from the field. The questions raised could be of use for further detailed research by postgraduate students and researchers. Ideally the these questions could contribute to the social dynamic of face to face discourse between academics, other parties in the staff rooms, classrooms, policy rooms and so forth.

Method
This paper offers a general review of research and literature from the fields of business, management, education and the social sciences that relate to quality. An interpretive research approach is utilised, descriptions are provided, and meaning and assumptions are constructed. I perceive this method as a subjective social engagement with the 'footprints'[2] evident in printed and electronic media.

Originality
The paper endeavours to describe a historical macro economic context of the evolution of quality as a movement and then detail micro academic discourse relating to quality in higher education sector.

Keywords: *Quality movement, Quality Assessment, Quality Assurance, Quality Enhancement, Higher Education (UK)*

Introduction

> Within the workshops, early management assumed a variety of harsh and despotic forms, since the creation of a 'free labour force' required coercive methods to habituate the workers to their tasks and keep them working throughout the day and the year.
>
> (Braverman 1998: 45)

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Here I endeavour to chart some of the generic signposts that led to the emergence of quality as a tool in the business, production and management fields within the 'capitalist mode of production'.[3] This is not intended to be an extensive investigation but rather an introduction to the relevant material, the rationale being to support the assumption of the emergence of 'quality' as a philosophy, a tool and a standard within industry and business and to identify emergent academic issues, and concerns and questions relating to the utilisation of quality as a tool in the higher education sector, where there is a need for further research. Evidence and commentary will be confined to management texts, sociology, electronic management and business journals, and web sources, as well as my own experience as a practitioner in the higher education sector. The mode of enquiry is firmly subjective and located in the interpretative paradigm. From the outset I claim to be seeking to construct meaning and understanding from social phenomena; I do not intend to be objective, seek causality or propose theory for generalisation. In order not to let the focus of this paper drift into the trenches of the 'paradigmatic wars', I direct the reader to two works that give a detailed introduction into the interpretative paradigm and surrounding discourse: Schwandt (2003: 293–326, cited in Denzin and Lincoln 2003) and Blaikie (1993: 93–127).

The Quality Movement

The term 'quality' has become synonymous with contemporary management theory, practice and policy. Nearly every management textbook has a section or chapter dedicated to 'quality' in some shape or form; examples include Quality Control (Daft 2000), Quality Assurance (Shattock 2003), Total Quality Management (Tiernan *et al.* 2001), Quality Circles (Mintzberg *et al.* 1995) and Quality of Working Life (Boleman and Deal 1997). Some academic and professional journals are committed solely to exploring quality issues, as demonstrated by titles such as *Quality Assurance in Education*, *Quality Progress*, *Quality Management*, *TQM Magazine* and *Total Quality Management*. From a limited search, using the Emerald online journals search engine, inputting each of the above terms and restricting the search to abstracts only, the following number of hits were recorded (see Table 1).

Quality items in abstracts	
Quality item	**Number of hits**
Quality	6,378
Quality Assurance	364
Quality Control	956
Quality Circles	63
Quality Culture	385
Quality of Working Life	42
Quality audits	155
Quality reviews	269

Table 1: Number of quality item hits from Emerald Abstracts 23/05/2004

When 'Quality' was entered as an independent item and not restricted to abstracts but instead opened to a full text search, over 34,730 hits were recorded. I am not attempting to undertake rigorous research in this example; instead the reader's attention is drawn to the proliferation of literature on this subject and its diverse manifestations.

At present, 'Quality' as a tool is now embedded in (real life) work practices, national policy[4] and international trade regulations. Peters (1996: 24) claims that the origin of Quality Control and Quality Assurance can be traced back to the nineteenth century and the Eli Whitney armaments plant in the USA. This company endeavoured to produce a 'trusted brand' by assuring the quality of the product. He further creates linkages with Taylor's scientific management regarding both the 'division of labour' and the 'specialisation of labour'. By considering the sociological theories of Durkheim, Weber, Marx and Braverman relating to the Industrial Revolution and evolving work practice, and incorporating a quality component, 'Quality' as a tool could be examined as such. This development highlighted the shift from the individual 'skilled artisan-craftsperson' to industrialisation and mass production, where the creativity of the individual skilled worker had to be 're-engineered' and departmentalised into simplistic process-specific tasks (de-skilling) that could be measured and controlled by the owners of the 'means of production'.

The internationalisation of 'Quality' as a tool within the 'means of production' in the 'core countries' of the 'capitalist world economy' (Wallerstein 1974, World Systems Theory, cited in Giddens 1995: 541–542) has been incrementally pursued by core nation states thought bodies, such as the International Standards Organisation (ISO 9000, 1987) and the British Standards Institute (BSI 5750, 1979). Blackmore (2004) claims these standards were accepted by the then European Community (EC) of the time. Ninety other countries have since consecutively agreed to these standards and their successors. Blackmore links the evolution of these standards to the US Department of Defence and its involvement with the regeneration of Japan after the Second World War. Pecht and Boulton (1995) suggest there were three prominent figures involved in coordinating this restructuring process. These were General Douglas McArthur, Homer Sarasohn and Edward Deming. During the 1940s and 1950s in Japan quality control and quality assurance procedures were applied to industrial development, from the gathering of raw materials for the production process, the manufacturing plants to the end product. Gradually the focus on quality as a tool moved from the production process to management and organisational systems with the introduction in the 1950s by Juran of Total Quality Control (TQC). This marked a directional shift from an internal processes focus that guaranteed the quality of the product to an external focus on customer needs, evident in the slogan 'the customer comes first'.

Japan, by dint of their culture and 'work ethic' (a Weberian term) embraced this quality philosophy so fully that the country emerged as a major industrial power during the 1980s and 1990s. Comparison can be drawn with Weber's concept of the 'Protestant work ethic' and its contribution to the emergence of capitalism during the Industrial Revolution. Some of the main characteristics of the thesis are: hard work and frugality on earth, which would be rewarded in the metaphysical Christian afterlife; the individual as a self-motivated entrepreneur; the reinvestment of wealth in the labour process (rather than personal accumulation); and a break away from superstition and magic in favour of rational thought. In Japan's case the work ethic and reward was probably located in the hegemonic collectivity of the empirical culture (conformity), as expressed in a communal will to rebuild the nation state and once again establish national pride and honour. The emergent Japanese workforce operated under the paternal governance of the company, which in turn aimed to

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achieve a public good. The Weberian concept of 'rationalisation' seemed to be embedded in the industrial development strategies and labour process from the start of the regeneration project, and would prove to be a major enabling factor in the incremental development and acceptance of quality as both a process and a philosophy (there was no visible resistance from the work force). Mindful of the Japanese success and giving due regard to this new competitive environment – national, translational, emergent global and what Giddens (2004: 98) identifies as the 'time–space convergence' – quantitative improvements in both transportation and communication modes have reduced the social construct of time and space. Western industrialised nations have adopted quality assurance procedures such as ISO 9000 (1987), ISO 9001 (focus on production processes), 9002, 9003 (focus on services and management) (1994) and in 2000 all three were combined as ISO 9001-2000. While these ISO standards set out clear criteria for quality assurance and quality systems, thereby giving some comfort of mind to the potential customer, they also serve as a certification system. To obtain and display an ISO certification on a product or service a quality audit had to be carried out by a team of experts, commissioned by ISO. Blackmore (2004) terms this certification process a 'business passport', that is a guarantee to customers that they were dealing with a creditable organisation (over 550,000 organisations are now certified with ISO standards). I question whether within the political/economic spheres of industrialised Western nation states, the ISO system was perceived as a genuine quality philosophy or as a benchmarking system to keep at bay competition from newly developing countries. Within the business and financial sectors the notion of 'Quality' as a tool had emerged as both a means to generate efficiency and as a marketing brand (the Q mark) to sell products and services.

In the typography outlined in Table 2 I attempt to create a snapshot of some of the gradual turning points in the development and dissemination of 'Quality' in its many forms in the industrial, business, economic and political sectors. I utilise Rostow's Stages of Economic Development model to draw a parallel between the turning points in the Quality Movement's ideological development. While Rostow's model may be critiqued now, it was prominent during the periods listed in Table 2. I caution that this is only a speculative, or loose-fit model. Its only purpose here is to highlight the fact that no work practice or management philosophy happens in isolation from the broader multi-dimensional external environment drivers and power blocs, particularly within the 'capitalist mode of production'.

Evolution of Quality as a tool			
Period	Quality as an item	Effects	Rostow's Economic Stages of Development
1940s	Focus: internal business environment; 'efficiency'	Raw materials, manufacturing process, specifications	Transitional: Stage 2 (post-WW11 Japan)
1950s	Focus: internal and external market environments; 'philosophy'	Management systems and operations, customer needs	Take off: Stage 3 (industrialisation in Japan)
1980s	Focus: international	Standardisation,	Drive for maturity:

	market environment; 'business culture'	certification, market branding	Stage 4 (innovation, diverse production, international trade)
1990s	Focus: global economy; accountability and improvement'	Sophisticated strategic management, international trade agreements, competitive advantage	High mass consumption: Stage 5 (consumerism and globalisation)

Table 2: Focus of 'Quality' as an item from the 1940s to the 1990s: Rostow's Stages of Economic Development

Thus far I have provided generic indicators that signpost the major shifts in the 'quality' paradigm. The information is descriptive rather than scientific and speculative connections are made. My main focus was to direct the reader's attention to 'Quality' as a movement, its evolution and the economic mode of production – capitalism – from which it emerged. This brief historical context on quality as a tool within the capitalist ideology should assist in the critical analysis of superimposing an 'economic mode' onto an 'educational mode', or business quality models upon the higher education sector. The 1996 article by Halstead and Taylor identifies the above shift, distinguishing between the fundamental goals and values of education and whether they are located in the domain of economic liberalism or political liberalism. Duff *et al*. (2000a: 21) claim that '[t]he methods and language of quality assurance, quality improvement and enhancement and quality audit, pioneered in industry and business have been applied to higher education in many countries across the world over the past fifteen to twenty years' (see also Srikanthan and Dalrymple 2003 for a detailed account of the use of the business model in education). I question whether the introduction of quality as a tool in the higher education sector is yet another step in the industrialisation and 'commodification' of education and a further nail in the coffin of academic freedom. To address these issues it is worth reviewing some of the academic literature from the higher education sector in the USA and UK, which has evolved into a substantial body of work.

Quality reviews in higher education: the literature
The theory and practice-in-action, or 'praxis', of quality reviews in the higher education sectors internationally has a comparatively long tradition, particularly in the USA (El-Khawas and Shab 1998: 95). The two authors carried out a comparative study of quality reviews in which they distinguished between internal and external orientated reviews and compared case studies of models in the USA with those in operation in Europe. They claim that the practice of internal quality reviews has a longer history than the emerging statutory requirement for external reviews. Answering their own question about whether reviews should be of either a monitoring or improvement focus, they suggest 'mutuality' as a best practice approach that takes account of the concerns of academia and the legitimate concerns of others. Harvey (1997: 134) suggests that the traditional approach to quality reviews was internal, with an emphasis on developing 'excellence' in the programme, department or discipline. However, he notes there are is tension and some 'scepticism' among academics in relation to the drive for external reviews with a focus on accountability and 'value for money'. He claims that 'Quality' which encompasses 'control' and 'monitoring' mechanisms is 'intrusive' to 'academic autonomy' and to Quality itself. From his research and experience he claims that the internal review is more

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advantageous, 'not so much for the outcomes it produces but for the very process of dialogue and reflection it sets in train' (Harvey 1997: 135). In essence he argues that quality in his opinion is not about control or excellence, but rather, 'quality is about transformation' (1997: 137). He entrenches his line of reasoning in the micro dynamic student–lecturer relationship and the 'transformative learning process' that derives from this interaction. He doesn't accept the notion of a student as a customer buying into a service or product, but rather as a participant in a transformational process. This process should be both 'participant enhancing' – leading to change – and 'participant empowering' – taking ownership. However, Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003: 318) do not accept that the student is not a customer. They perceive the higher education sector as a marketplace in which different countries compete aggressively for their share of the customer base and for international students. They identify Tony Blair's 1999 initiative to attract international students as a 'UK marketing campaign and penetration in the world markets of international education'. Table 3 below provides a snapshot of the international student market share of the top three countries as of 2000.

International student market share 2000	
Country	**Market share (intake of international students)**
USA	547,867
UK	224,660
Australia	188,277

Table 3: International student intake
Source: adopted from Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003: 318)

Binsardi and Ekwulugo's epistemology is business-focused and within the neoliberal model (see Hermann 2005) whereby the higher education sector provides a product (education) and customers (students) choose to buy this product. Within this model education is constructed to fulfil market needs. Binsardi and Ekwulugo conclude as a result of their empirical international research that the primary indicators international students consider before making a choice on the institute they wish to attend are: reputation, award recognition, admissions procedures, immigration procedures and cost of living. Implicit in their article is the premise that institutes cannot rely on reputation alone but must establish international credibility and recognition of their awards. The primary international benchmarking mechanism for this is through quality assurance certification. Their argument correlates well with Peters' 1996 paper 'Quality Management as a Brand-building Strategy', in which he suggests that quality assurance provides for consumer trust in 'brands' and therefore added value and market share loyalty. He also suggests that business should be implementing a Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy.

Yorke (1994, 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 1999) has presented a number of papers exploring the rhetoric, practice and implications of quality assurance/assessment/enhancement in the higher education sector in England and globally. Underpinning his articles is the adaptation of the philosophy of TQM and the dynamic interchange between national policy drivers and the actual institutional interface. Primarily he presents a macro examination of Quality, utilising the lens of TQM rather than specifically Quality Assurance. He establishes explicitly the link between external quality assessments – accountability and performance – and national funding allocation and

the implications for the individual institutes. He states: 'The Government [UK] is not entirely convinced that the self-regulation of higher education would be sufficiently rigorous. Pressures on funding have exacerbated the tensions' (1994: 6). More, he goes on to maintain that the onus is now on the higher education sector (under the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, UK) to be proactive in both dialogue and the implementation of a TQM approach, rather than quality assurance, and that the focus should be clearly directed at pursuing a Quality Enhancement Model (1994, 1995, 1997a, 1997b). The typology set out in Table 4 provides distinctions between different quality models.

Modes of Quality			
Higher education	**Industry& commerce**	**Purpose**	**Focus**
Quality Assessment	Quality Control	Inspection, performance, rectification	Retrospective, internal environment
Quality Assurance	Quality Assurance	Anticipation, prevention	Present, internal and external environments
Quality Enhancement	Quality Improvement	Improvement, radical change	Forward looking, multiple complex environments

Table 4: Different Quality approaches
Source: adapted from Yorke (1997a: 145)

It may be observed from Table 4 that Quality Assessment is the educational equivalent of Quality Control. Blackmore (2004) locates Quality Assessment and Quality Audit within the same control paradigm. Withers (2002) claims the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) favours the Quality Control paradigm, with its key indicators of accountability, monitoring and measurements. He argues that the control paradigm is located in behaviourism, or positivism, where objectives can be measured by external impartial expert(s). Control is applied by means of funding sanctions. He contends that the formalisation of quality audits in the higher education sector was constituted in the government White Paper, *Higher Education*, which set up a new framework (HMSO 1991) in which accountability and value for money were the underpinning tenets. This framework replaced the binary system that had been place since the 1960s. The recommendations in the White Paper were implemented in 1992 with the formation of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC). The HEQC has four areas of work: audits; codification of Good Practice; production of surveys; reports and development work. Gore *et al*. (2000: 77) infer that the dominant quality mode in the UK is centred on an epistemology of 'technical rationality'. They state this approach relies on 'laws, rules, prescriptions, schedules and routines to control and standardise systems'. In essence this is a retrospective bureaucratic method: if procedures are followed and the paperwork is in order, then quality is approved.

Quality Assurance, on the other hand, seems to be directed towards preventative measures. Peters (1996) claims Quality Assurance measures processes in action and stimulates intervention to 'add value' to the product rather than inspecting the end product. Blackmore (2004) identifies the Quality Assurance standards in ISO 9001 (several UK higher education institutes have achieved this certification) as rigorously

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incorporating internal cycles of planning, auditing, verification, recording, action and then evaluation of the action. Claiming that the goal is to 'measure fitness for purpose and achieve fitness of purpose' (2004: 130), while the onus is on intervention within processes and systems the methodology still correlates both with Withers' 'control paradigm' and Gore *et al.*'s 'technical rationality' in that it is proceduristic, measurement fixated and relies upon the quality expert (or committee) to observe, monitor and report.

Withers (2002) suggests the alternative paradigm 'Enhancement'. Gore *et al.* (2000: 77) assert that the enhancement approach takes on what they term, 'an epistemology of professional-artistry'. Underpinning this worldview is the acceptance that not everything can be measured or planned for and that the following attributes should be encouraged rather than restricted: creativity, innovation, risk taking, collective participation, multi-stakeholder perspectives. A direct linkage between this epistemology of enhancement and TQM is presented in their paper 'Organisational Self Assessment: Measuring Educational Quality in Two Paradigms' (Gore *et al.* 2000).

Yorke's 1999 article 'Assuring Quality and Standards in Globalised Higher Education' outlines the intrinsic correlation between the national drive for economic competitiveness and the responsibility of institutes to provide quality 'knowledge capital' to counteract the challenges posed by globalisation. Yorke firmly reiterates that the quality direction (outcome) at both national and institute levels should be one of enhancement rather than accountability: 'The demands of the future require a more forward-looking approach in which enhancement is to the fore, and in which accountability follows' (1999: 100).

Blackmore (2004: 134) questions whether this shift in focus has in fact taken place. She claims that the current Internal Academic Quality Audit is more aligned to 'inspection and quality control than it is to quality assurance and TQM', and locates the emergence of the current UK model within the business, or private sector, philosophy of the 1990s conservative government, particularly John Major and the Dearing Committee's report of 1996 (2004: 131). The main premise has been a drive for rationalisation, accountability and the incorporation of a business model that dovetailed competitive production (knowledge capital for enterprise) with value for money, both for the customer (student) and the nation state. This approach concurs with Hermann's (2005) analysis of the neoliberalisation of Europe.

Gibbs and Iacovidou (2004) takes the critique of national policy in the UK relating to internal quality audits to a more radical plateau, suggesting that the systematic quality audit process has led to a 'pedagogy of confinement', wherein both academic exploration is constrained to the measuring of 'learning outcomes' and the autonomy of the institution is confined by the political and ideological frameworks of the external reviewers/agencies. They state: 'This may lead to instrumentality which would change education from a potential mode of revealing oneself through trust, based on unspecified personal obligation, to one where the economic exchange holds sway' (2004: 116). The essence of their argument is that academic drift is shaped by the enforcement of a market ideology into scholarly activities. This construct disempowers the academic community by confining academic freedom. Knowledge and knowledge creation thus becomes a commodity within a linear process of

production. The marketing, sale and efficiency of this production line can be measured. Jackson (1997: 134), while not adopting so radical a view as Gibbs and Iacovidou, does however state that the 'drivers for change in the higher education regulatory regime of the 1990s reflect the political ideologies which have been applied to the whole of the public service sector', namely right wing conservatism. It is also worth noting at this point Peters' observations under the chapter heading, 'The Hard-to-swallow Medicine of TQM' (1996: 36), which include claims such as 'ideological indoctrination', 'cult-like organisations' and the 'removal of non-conforming personnel as assiduously as we would remove non-conforming components'. Does this compare with Braverman's statement, given at the beginning of this paper, on the habituation of the worker? For in-depth coverage of TQM and some answers to this question see Morgan's and Murgatroyd's 1999 work *Total Quality Management in the Public Sector*.

From reviewing the academic literature relating to quality as a tool in the higher education sector in the UK I suggest that quality reviews seem to have raised certain key concerns relating to academics. Rather than clustering and presenting statements of these concerns and issues, I will instead pose polemic questions, primarily because the debate is ongoing and inconclusive. Among those questions are the following:

- Do quality reviews shift the 'locus of control' from the institute to the external reviews/agency?
- Is the purpose of quality reviews to monitor performance and accountability or to provide assistance and aid enhancement?
- Does the review process have a positive/negative impact on the following: student–lecturer learning relationship and/or curricula development?
- Do quality reviews foster managerialism or collegiality?

These are significant questions and cannot be addressed adequately in this short paper, especially in the context of the Irish higher education context. To answer them a researcher would have to undertake extensive longitudinal research across all aspects of the educational and economic landscape. However, here I hope to provide a limited snapshot response to them. The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, in its operational document the *Handbook for Academic Review: England 2004*, indirectly provides clues to these questions. The document states that the purpose of the reviews are to: 'secure value for public investment', 'encourage improvements in the quality of education' and 'provide the public with accessible information relating to the quality of the institute' (2004: 1). From the implicit and explicit evidence provided in this document I feel there are grounds to claim that the systematic quality review approach adopted by the UK will lead to a shift in the locus of control from the institute to the external agency and the general public. The principle lever for this shift will be an implicit threat to potential public funding available to institutes should the quality review turn up negative findings as public perception will be affected by publishing the quality review reports in a league table format. Both public perception and the reputation of the individual institutions will either be enhanced or reduced. The empirical manifestation of this process will be evident in the number of future student enrolments. The impact on pedagogy and curricula could arguably lead to a shift to the 'utilisation' model of education, to the detriment of the liberal education model. The control paradigm is unable to facilitate collegiality because it is a tool for applying management authority and control. Thus,

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if collegiality is important, then the enhancement model of quality seems to offer the most promise as a way forward. We await future developments with critical interest.

Notes

1 Undergraduate and postgraduates students are deliberately named as part of the target audience for this paper, and while I consider there exists a lot of rhetoric relating to so called student centredness policy and procedures in journals, the student audience and voice is not always sought or encouraged.

2 Dr Andrew Loxley, term used during a seminar at Trinity College Dublin, 17 June 2006.

3 Marx's concept of the labour process; see Braverman (1998) for a detailed account.

4 See Towards 2016, Ten-year Framework Social Partnership Draft Agreement 2006–2015. This document is the centre of current intensive negotiations between the Irish social partners. Available at:
http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/index.asp?locID=181&docID=-1 education, pp.121–133.

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